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**The Mutated Chechen Identity:  
“Akhmat Sila!”  
The Significance of a Slogan and its Proliferation in the  
Digital and Physical Space**

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**The Mutated Chechen Identity:  
“Akhmat Sila!”  
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Space**

**By**

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## **Dedications**

I would like to dedicate this academic piece to my mother, grandmother, and wife Carlotta.

These two ladies since my birth instilled the importance of education in me. Even when I went through my bullheaded assault on education period in the early 2010s, they reminded me with their experience of not having the opportunity. My mom only attained her associates and was not allowed to go further and my grandma only went to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade before needing to take the responsibilities of family duty. I could not have continued through my education without my wife's support, especially the times where I had the wild hair thinking it would be easier to make a living slinging chains on the Texas oil rigs. Thank God she was there to snap me out of it and remind me to pursue a great opportunity not just given to anyone.



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## **Abstract**

### **The Mutated Chechen Identity: “Akhmat Sila!” The Significance of a Slogan in the Digital and Physical Space**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2021

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Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov has reshaped Chechen society to his ideal image. After two wars that made the city a living hell and an insurgency that was not cleared until the beginning of the last decade, Putin’s policy of Chechenisation that started in 2000 with the late Akmad-Hadji, has started to resemble a perceived peace. This peace provided the region’s inhabitants a sense of security and produces world-class sport fighters, catapulting young Chechen men and sometimes women up the social ladder. Despite the human-rights violations and accusations of funneling fighters to employment in the local armed forces, Kadyrov has been able to shape the image of the ideal Chechen man and simultaneously, reaffirm his power with a slogan, Akhmat-Sila. This slogan be heard in various mediums to the point of proliferation. This thesis will use a historical-digital ethnographic approach with a theoretical framework of nation branding to explain the shifts in Chechen identity and the slogan Akhmat-Sila, providing a background on how Chechen warrior culture and the patronage that gives the slogan agency now. The slogan will be examined on Instagram and supporting media sources. Chapter 1 dives into the Caucasus imaginary and history of Tsarist Russia, leading into the two Chechen Wars and years after. Chapter 2 will expand on current research of Ramzan Kadyrov and his social media use, parsing out themes found in his Instagram account. Chapter 3 will focus on the theoretical framework that will support the qualitative approach for the phenomenon of the slogan. Chapter 4 will narrate the findings of the data, developing into a conclusion.

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## Introduction: How I Became Interested in Chechnya

“Akhmat Sila!”<sup>1</sup> This notorious slogan can be heard across the training halls at Akhmat Fight Clubs across Chechnya. Young men tussle across the mats, throwing precise hits that could knock a person’s soul out of their body followed by bone-crunching arm bars. Ambitious young Chechens hope to earn a spot in Ramzan Kadyrov’s top cadre of fighters and achieve a type of social mobility that until recently, was unheard of in the region.<sup>2</sup> Maybe Dagestani UFC fighter Khabib Nurmagomedov’s success and his Caucasus identification with the papakha in the octagon helped spur Akhmat Fight Club memberships across the North Caucasus.

But the reasons for fight club membership growth are more profound than fame. There is a long standing martial tradition that has existed for centuries in the North Caucasus.<sup>3</sup> This warrior culture has been used in the creation of a unique Chechen National Brand—one that is used for international recognition, supported through repeated utterance, and meaningful to those who partake in it. Kadyrov’s slogan is indexical of the modern Chechen identity that has deep roots in local historical narratives. Bryant Gumbel shines a light on this warrior culture while interviewing Kadyrov. Kadyrov uses a comparison to demonstrate his point, “ While a Jewish parent might say to their child you’ll be a professor or a scientist. Here our parents say, he’s going to be a warrior.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zidan, Karim. “UFC Champ Kamaru Usman Visits Chechen Dictator Ramzan Kadyrov’s MMA Fight Club.” Bloody Elbow, November 26, 2020. <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2020/11/26/21721674/ufc-champ-kamaru-usman-chechen-dictator-ramzan-kadyrovs-mma-fight-club-politics>.

<sup>2</sup> NPR. “Chechen Leader’s MMA Empire: A Tool For Propaganda And More.” NPR.org, July 31, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/31/540652582/chechen-leaders-mma-empire-a-tool-for-propaganda-and-more>.

<sup>3</sup> Raimondi, Marc. “Inside the Hat That Helped Shape Khabib’s Identity.” ESPN.com, September 4, 2019. [https://www.espn.com/mma/story/\\_/id/27536389/ufc-254-hat-helped-shape-khabib-nurmagomedov-identity](https://www.espn.com/mma/story/_/id/27536389/ufc-254-hat-helped-shape-khabib-nurmagomedov-identity).

<sup>4</sup> HBO. Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel | Chechnya’s Strongman: Ramzan Kadyrov (Clip) | HBO, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVQFJyUTyXM>.

Before delving further into my thesis, I will speak of how I noticed this Chechen strongman and later, his proliferating slogan. I first noticed the notorious Instagram celebrity, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, in the middle of 2016. While scrolling on Instagram looking at a wide array of cat photos, I came across an Instagram post of a man who lost his cat. I then read further into the post and did a basic google search. At this point, I realized who this man with the lost cat was in the world. Ramzan Kadyrov, not yet kicked out of American social media by the Magnitsky Act, was quite prevalent on Instagram. Kadyrov, having an estimated “1.8 million followers,” at the time, hopelessly declared that, “We have completely lost our cat.”<sup>5</sup> Feeling Kadyrov’s pain of searching for a family pet, I climbed further down the rabbit hole of social media to see if he eventually found this cat. After a few minutes, I found more commentary on Kadyrov. Last Week Tonight host John Oliver was pulling Kadyrov’s leg in many ways, including the creation of a hashtag “#findkadyrovscat” that yielded hundreds of cat photos worldwide. Oliver then states that “Kadyrov is basically like a can of Monster energy drink come to life,” and “...honestly, I cannot recommend his Instagram feed enough.”<sup>6</sup>

John Oliver’s recommendation was not in vain, and I immediately started to follow Kadyrov when he still had access to his official personal account, @Kadyrov\_95. Never in my life had I ever seen such an eclectic character, much less the photos of performance by a supposed warlord; Kadyrov could be seen wrestling an alligator, holding a baby tiger, working out at a high intensity, sparring with his friends, meeting with local muftis and clerics, shooting automatic weapons, and posing with ordinary Chechens on his personal Instagram account. After examining Kadyrov’s Instagram, there was no doubt why he was so popular—he was similar to a

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<sup>5</sup> Kennedy, Merritt. “When The Cat’s Away: Chechen Strongman Spars With John Oliver Over Lost Feline.” NPR.org, May 25, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/05/25/479441645/when-the-cats-away-chechen-strongman-spars-with-john-oliver-over-lost-feline>

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, Chechen Strongman Spars With John Oliver, Website.



more reserved version of Dan Bilzerian, an Armenian-American Instagram celebrity larger than life.<sup>7</sup> However, Oliver emphasizes the importance of finding Kadyrov's cat, stating "For the good of the Chechen people and stability in the whole region, we have to find this f\*\*\*\*\*'s cat."<sup>8</sup>

The fact that a warlord is torn by the departure of his feline piqued my interest. What John Oliver ominously stated about Chechen stability lying totally on Kadyrov's shoulders brought me to formulate a few questions: Why does Chechen stability all rely on Ramzan Kadyrov, and what factors put him into his position as head of the Chechen Republic? Why is he so important for the region and to Russia? Why is he so popular on Instagram? These curiosities attached themselves to my interests filed in my mental library for later academic use that I carried with me after I left the U.S. Navy in May 2017.

During my undergraduate years, I learned Russian history and culture with an emphasis on Chechen history and the tumultuous events the region endured the previous thirty years. These events consisted of a separatist movement, two full scale wars that leveled Grozny, a decade-long jihadi insurgency, international human rights violations, and an energetic strongman who currently rules the region as his "private fiefdom."<sup>9</sup> Recent Chechen history is inseparable from the Kadyrov family's ascent to power. After December 20<sup>th</sup> 2017, Kadyrov was blocked from all US-owned social media<sup>10</sup> platforms under the Magnitsky Act for "human rights violations."<sup>11</sup> Kadyrov's followers were so upset, the only present NGO in the region, Memorial

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<sup>7</sup> Bilzerian, Dan. "Dan Bilzerian's (@danbilzerian) Profile on Instagram • 1,361 Posts." Social Media. Instagram.com. Accessed December 9, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/danbilzerian/>.

<sup>8</sup> Kennedy, Chechen Strongman Spars With John Oliver, Website.

<sup>9</sup> Lokshina, Tanya. "Dispatches: The Price of Dissent in Chechnya." Human Rights Watch, April 13, 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/13/dispatches-price-dissent-chechnya>.

<sup>10</sup> The platforms included at the time were Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter. However, Kadyrov's influence was mainly on Instagram.

<sup>11</sup> Eckel, Mike. "U.S. Sanctions Chechen Leader Kadyrov, Four Others Under Magnitsky Act." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, December 20, 2017. <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-sanctions-kadyrov-four-others-magnitsky-act/28929548.html>.

in neighboring Ingushetia, was “torched by masked men.”<sup>12</sup> Memorial’s Oleg Orlov explains why the event happened, “We were held responsible for this by Kadyrov and his inner circle because we are one of the very few sources of information about rights abuses in Chechnya,” which contributed to breaking the silence on Kadyrov’s abuses.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the notoriety surrounding Kadyrov, he has continued to be on my radar over the years. I continued to follow the development of the Chechen Instagram sphere online. One area that I noticed during my first semester of my graduate program was the use of the slogan, “Akhmat-Sila” by Kadyrov’s government and supporters.<sup>14</sup>

The slogan commemorates Ramzan Kadyrov’s late father, Akhmad-Hadji Kadyrov. Akhmad-Hadji was the original Kremlin-appointed Chechen leader until his assassination at the FC Terek Dinamo Football Stadium in Grozny in May 2004.<sup>15</sup> The exact birth of the term “Akhmat-Sila” is not yet clear, but it can be assumed that it came to be during the last year of Kadyrov’s official Instagram account in 2017, before the Magnitsky Act brought him under U.S. sanctions, thus closing his account to 3 million followers. The term may also have sprouted out of his Akhmat Fight Club, with the earliest video of the facility dating back to 2015 and the earliest comment posting “Ахмат сила” dating back to 2017, showing fighters clothed in fight club apparel, some with the elder Kadyrov’s face stamped on the front.<sup>16</sup>

In 2020, Akmat-Sila is not only a slogan for all Chechens who side with Kadyrov, but a term used to encompass all parts of an ideal Chechen identity. The slogan seems to be indexical

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<sup>12</sup> Bennetts, Marc. “Chechen Leader’s Instagram Closure ‘Led to Revenge Attacks’ on NGO.” The Guardian, January 21, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/21/chechen-leaders-instagram-closure-led-to-revenge-attacks-on-ngo>

<sup>13</sup> Bennetts, Chechen Leader’s Instagram Closure, Website.

<sup>14</sup> In Russian: Ахмат-Сила

<sup>15</sup> Mirumyan, Karine. “Analysis: How Chechen Leader Builds His Father’s Personality Cult – BBC Monitoring.” <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/>, June 6, 2019. <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200v0oc>

<sup>16</sup> This page was recently closed due to December 2020 U.S. sanctions: Fight Club Akhmat. Рамзан Кадыров Посетил Тренировку Клуба “Ахмат,” 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg5ug9xpwH0>

of belonging to a social circle within Chechnya that identifies with the Kadyrov regime, its fighters, security forces and the social mobility that comes with it. The phenomenon of the term can be seen overtly on clothing, art designs, buildings, a music video, Instagram videos, combat-sport battle cries, apparel, news broadcasts, local military training facilities, and sometimes, in the local Sufi Islam. The term warrants a deeper examination of its origins and significance, one that takes place not only in the physical, but the digital space of social networks and supporting online resources. My thesis will not try to solve any pertinent questions outright, but to expand on the topic of the evolving Chechen identity and how Ramzan Kadyrov has branded the modern identity to his ideal of Checheness and all that it encompasses.<sup>17</sup>

Simply, the proliferation of Akhmat-Sila on everything in Chechnya is too noticeable not to discuss. The slogan seems to be a reinforcement of the Kadyrov regime. The slogan seems to serve as an indication of regime support and an approval for all its actions. The slogan seems to convey social mobility and honor by Kadyrov's club fighters and local armed units. The slogan is not restricted only to Chechnya, but to anyone Kadyrov sponsors, patronizes, or supports internationally. Religiously, the slogan attempts to mutate traditional teachings into Kadyrov's personalized rituals, often memorializing his late father Akhmad-Hadji as a saint. The slogan happens to lean pro-Russian, meaning that it does not carry the original ideal of Chechen freedom seen in Russian literature or in the First Chechen War. Digitally, the slogan serves Kadyrov's motive of recognition by spreading like wildfire through constant recirculation, utterances, hashtags, and merchandise branding. In addition, Akhmat-Sila synthesizes with other known Chechen indexical signs, often indicating more ominous aspects of online control.

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<sup>17</sup> Avedissian, Karena. "Clerics, Weightlifters, and Politicians: Ramzan Kadyrov's Instagram as an Official Project of Chechen Memory and Identity Production." *Caucasus Survey* 4, no. 1 (January 8, 2016): 24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2015.1119998>.

Chapter 1 will discuss the formation of Chechen Identity in Russian literature and through the lives of a few prominent Chechen figures with a Russian Counter-figure to give context to the Russian-Chechen relationship, leading to Ramzan Kadyrov's power today after the Chechen Wars. Chapter 2 will traverse the recent literature of Kadyrov and his influence/social media use in contemporary Chechnya. Chapter 3 will explain the theoretical framework used to explicate the slogan Akhmat-Sila and its importance for the Kadyrov regime along with ethical concerns in the digital sphere. Chapter 4 will narrate the research through the themes of Kadyrov's slogan in pre and post-sanctions postings, fight club prize fighters, on infrastructure, and in the Chechen armed forces. The conclusion will wrap up the findings to attempt to tell what Akhmat-Sila entails for the regime and its supporters in Kadyrov's Chechnya.

## Chapter 1: Chechen Identity Construction in Literature and History

Before any true scholarly research had been conducted in the North Caucasus, the existence of what Soviet bureaucrats coined “the small nations” came to existence in Russian literature through the Imperialist Russian perspective.<sup>18</sup> Literature of the North Caucasus expanded during the Tsarist Russian Empire’s expansion south in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This southward expansion led to the first encounters between Russians and Chechens around July 1722 when Peter the Great went down the Volga into the Caspian sea, landing in a spot on the coast that he named “Petrovsk,” in what is known as Makhachkala in modern day Dagestan.<sup>19</sup> The encounters started when the expedition pushed inward, leading to conflicts with what we would call the Chechen people today. These conflicts would soon develop the strongmen figures of Imam Shamil for Chechens and General Alexei Yermolov for Russians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and those of General Djokhar Dudayev and Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov in the 20<sup>th</sup>. The connection of contemporary Chechen identity and past Russian literature is imperative, because this literature develops the basis for the postmodern warrior myth that Ramzan Kadyrov uses to develop his slogan, Akhmat-Sila.

One of the first Russian writers to form an ideation of the Caucasus in Chechnya was Alexander Pushkin. Pushkin’s experience influenced his work *The Caucasus Prisoner*, romanticizing the sheer natural beauty in the region and exotic wildness in the southern nations in the context of a Russian captive narrative of a cosmopolitan in Chechnya. In addition, Mikhail Lermontov was mesmerized by the region, stating, “The Caucasus mountains are sacred to me. And so early! At ten! Oh that mystery, that lost paradise will claw at my mind until the grave.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Meier, Andrew. *To The Heart Of A Conflict CHECHNYA*. 15. New York-London: W.W. Norton, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Gall, Carlotta, and Thomas De Wall. *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*. 37. London, UK: Pan Books, 1997

<sup>20</sup> Smith, Sebastian. *Allah’s Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya*. 269. New York, NY: I.B Tauris Publishers, 2001. [www.ibtauris.com](http://www.ibtauris.com).

Lermontov also uses the region for his setting for “Bela” in *The Heroes Of Our Times*, a story of Maxim and Pechorin’s time in the Caucasus, in which Pechorin has a horse for a bride trade deal with Bela’s younger brother Azamat, followed by Kazbich, the victim of the misappropriation, coming and killing Bela’s father and mortally wounding her in revenge. Not one of the most endearing stories of the *Gortsy*,<sup>21</sup> but for sure to etch and imagination of the southern peoples of Russia for years to come.

Leo Tolstoy’s voluntary military experience in the 1850s created the basis for the greater Caucasus imaginary, which led to his works *The Cossacks* and the fictional-realist piece *Hadji Murad*, highlighting the Chechen Rebel and his difficulties with Russians and his own people. Tolstoy delves into how each nation saw their own customs to explain how you cannot expect your own culture to be the standard, writing, ‘The dog gave meat to the ass and the ass gave hay to the dog, and both went hungry’ and “Its own customs seem good to each nation.”<sup>22</sup> Tolstoy’s cultural relativity and time in Chechnya helped explain the differences between the two cultures and how Russian ideals were not the same as Chechen ideals and vice-versa. Tolstoy’s presence in the North Caucasus is still reveled, with funds from the Kadyrov Foundation going towards the Leo Tolstoy museum renovations in Chechnya.<sup>23</sup> Tolstoy’s descendants believe that without his sojourn in Chechnya, many of his greatest works would have never emerged:

For Leo Tolstoy, his stay in the Caucasus was a turning point in his life and biography. It is not known whether such masterpieces as *Hadji Murad*, *Cossacks* and even *War and Peace* would have been created if it had not been for his stay in the Caucasus and here in Chechnya.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Word for mountain peoples, specifically for the Caucasus Mountain range.

<sup>22</sup> Tolstoy, Leo. *Hadji Murad*. 80. Digireads.com Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>23</sup> Kosumov, L. “Турмаршрут «по следам Льва Толстого» объявили открытым.” <https://grozny.tv>, December 7, 2019. <https://grozny.tv/news/tourism/35382>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. The original Russian: “Для Льва Толстого пребывание на Кавказе было переломным моментом его жизни и биографии. Неизвестно были ли бы созданы такие его шедевры как «Хаджи-Мурат», «Казачьи» и даже «Война и мир», если бы не его пребывание на Кавказе и здесь в Чечне.”

Tolstoy's family may be correct. Tolstoy was a factor in Russo-Chechen relations. In a Grozny TV interview, Tolstoy's Great Grand-Son Vladimir Tolstoy underscored his great-grandfather's significance to Chechens, "The Chechen people think that Tolstoy wrote most truthfully of the events that happened then and the character of the mountain peoples, their striving to be independent, for freedom, and their religious, ethnic and other particularities."<sup>25</sup>

Although not Chechen, the younger Tolstoy's statement of praise is very important. According to the Tolstoy's descendant's statement above, the Chechen people agreed with Tolstoy's account of their way of life enough to have a museum and town renamed for him, Tolstoy-Yurt. Tolstoy depicted a traditional Chechen identity in literature that more or less renders more truth than myth. This agreed imaginary of Chechen identity coincides with the Tolstoy museum's "...ethnographic mission, to depict the life of Chechens at the time when Tolstoy lived there."<sup>26</sup> Without Tolstoy's time in the Caucasus, the Caucasus imaginary in the Russian literary public might be opaque at best, and some of his best works may not have been produced.

Although considered outsiders, these classical Russian writers who spent time in the Caucasus have depicted the idea that the Chechen people are unique with their own identity, warrior culture, values, and centuries-old customs, known as the *adat*.<sup>27</sup> This accepted outsider view is reaffirmed by Kadyrov's funding to restore the Tolstoy museum, recognizing its ethnographic importance, and homage to the writer with Tolstoy-Yurt. This accepted view also brings into question of narrative formulation. Kadyrov's funding of the Tolstoy museum

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<sup>25</sup> Kishkovsky, Sophia. "Chechnya's Favorite Russian: Leo Tolstoy (Published 2009)." *The New York Times*, December 28, 2009, sec. Arts. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/29/arts/29iht-tolstoy.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Kishkovsky, Chechnya's Favorite Russian, Website.

<sup>27</sup> The ruling customs, which often pre-date and mix in with Islam, creating a unique variation of the religion in each region and possibly, each village depending on remoteness.

undeniably demonstrates his commitment to the pro-Russian narrative in Chechnya while coming off as the preserver of local *history*. As much as literature formulated the Caucasus imaginary to the Russian literary public, some critics disagree.

In *The Captive and the Gift*, Bruce Grant highlights how difficult it is to get a true sense of the customs, traditions, and visual clarity on what the Caucasus is for the fact that there has been 200 years of an ingrained and debated “literary Caucasus.”<sup>28</sup> Grant reminds us that although Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy all wrote about the Caucasus and highlighted specific attributes to the mountain cultures, the writers wrote in the Russian turned captive narrative in the context of Russian Imperialism which is a whole study on its own. In *Allah’s Mountains*, Sebastian Smith’s view agrees along similar lines, stating, “The Caucasus inspired some of these writers’ most glorious works, but ultimately, they were imperial servants, collectors of new countries.”<sup>29</sup> To get a better idea on how the image of Caucasians coincides with more contemporary times, Grant interviews former Soviet-Azeri director Rustem Ibrahimbekov on his view of the evolution of the Caucasian imaginary:

If we are going to talk about the image of Caucasians, then among the most important will be from Tolstoy—Hadji Murad—earlier than that, Pushkin’s poetry. We can point to the usual characteristics—the very brave, the masculine, the vibrant Caucasian who belongs to a civilized world, a highly organized world driven by honor and distinction that is, nonetheless, not very clear [to the Russian reader] beyond these key loyalties: to freedom, independence, honor, and so forth. If we take the same image today, then in Russian cinema and literature, the Caucasian is a street trader, a bandit, dishonorable, cruel. We all know the picture. That is to say, over the course of approximately 150 years, this image has been transformed monstrously [chudovishchno]. To a certain extent, it corresponds to reality. To a certain extent it is fair, and in other respects it is invented . . .

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<sup>28</sup> Grant, Bruce. *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus*. 10. Cornell University Press, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, Sebastian. *Allah’s Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya*. New York, NY: I.B Tauris Publishers, 2001. 11. [www.ibtauris.com](http://www.ibtauris.com).

<sup>30</sup> Grant, *The Captive and the Gift*, 143-144.



With Ibrahimbekov's interview, Grant displays that the Caucasus imaginary evolves with time. Ibrahimbekov also acknowledges that the Russian reader sometimes cannot read into the complexities of the mountain cultures. Despite this, the main aspects of the imaginary are never exactly perceived the same, but are based on long-standing qualities of freedom, honor, masculinity, and clan organization. This conflict of the Caucasus imaginary influences Ramzan Kadyrov's slogan Akhmat-Sila by giving a perceived identity by insiders and outsiders to build a base for his own branding of Chechen identity. Akhmat-Sila includes all these aspects of the perceived Caucasus imaginary along with his own modifications which we will see later in the thesis.

### **General Yermolov**

As we have explored how Chechens and other Caucasus peoples were viewed by the Imperialist Russian perspective in literature, Chechens got their first true parallel view of Russians and their customs through General Alexei Yermolov's military operations. A Napoleonic War veteran, General Yermolov was a military tyrant that burned a deep wound in the Chechen psyche. As Imam Shamil was for Chechens, General Yermolov proved to be the rallying figure for Russians. Much of the inflicted pain is carried in the Chechen oral historical tradition and the contradictions the Russians believed him to be, a Hero. Yermolov's stature commanded authority and had a mythical aura, in which Pushkin likened him to "the head of a tiger on a Herculean torso."<sup>31</sup> Yermolov's presence is confirmed with a Spanish Officer's description of the beefy figure, adding that "Ermolov is of an almost colossal height and very well formed, with a vigorous constitution and a martial attitude: these traits are very strongly pronounced, without being harsh; his expression is full of energy and vivacity; and his

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<sup>31</sup> Gall, Carlotta, and Thomas De Wall. *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*. 39. London, UK: Pan Books, 1997

penetrating look reveals him to be a superior man.”<sup>32</sup> Yermolov embodied the Imperialist Russian might.

In addition to his figure, Yermolov brought war to the *Gortsy* and started a precedent for years to come, a scorched earth policy in Chechnya.<sup>33</sup> Before Yermolov’s martial strategy reform, the standard operation of procedure was to wait for highlanders to come down and raid and then, have a defensive attack, which proved inefficient. Yermolov implemented Russian control aiming for dominance of the Gortsy by declaring, “I desire that the terror of my name should guard our frontiers more potently than chains or fortresses, that my word should be for the natives a law more inevitable than death.”<sup>34</sup> Yermolov was the Russian terror that came in like a wrecking ball, destroying anything in his path that he deemed uncivilized in the Tsarist sense. He burned villages to the ground, cut down forests, built forts, in which the capital of the region, Grozny, was the main one.<sup>35</sup> The tyrant general was only stopped by the Tsarist court in 1827, when he fell out of political favor for being accused of having a “few overt connections” to leaders in the “Decembrist Uprising.”<sup>36</sup> The Tsar dismissed him from his duties, leaving him to gripe and complain about the leadership of all the theater generals after him.

Anatol Lieven highlights that Yermolov still brought a sense of unforgiving Russian mentality more than 170 years later when Russia named a Cossack unit after the general.<sup>37</sup> In 1995 during the first war, Lieven recalls an encounter with these Cossacks and what they said about Chechnya’s fate. Lieven restates the Cossacks’ sentiment, “ We will ram pork fat down their throats with our bayonets as the Cossacks have always done...Stalin should have finished

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<sup>32</sup> King, Charles. *The Ghost of Freedom*. 45. Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>33</sup> “Gortsy” refers to highlanders, mountain peoples, or any group of people to predominantly inhabit mountainous areas.

<sup>34</sup> King, *The Ghost of Freedom*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Russian for terrible.

<sup>36</sup> King, *The Ghost of Freedom*, 49.

<sup>37</sup> Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya Tombstone of Russian Power*. 224. New Haven and London: Yale University.

the job in 1944.”<sup>38</sup> This statement reaffirms that Yermolov’s policies stuck to the Russian psyche for a dangerously long time, creating a destructive precedent in Chechnya that would create continuous Chechen resentments to Russian rule until the Second Chechen War.

### **Imam Shamil**

In the 1800s, a native Dagestani, Imam Shamil was one of the first architects to plant the seed of nationhood for Dagestanis and Chechens alike with a “mini Islamic state.”<sup>39</sup> Imam Shamil is most renowned for his duration of resistance to the Russian state, spanning 25 years of conflict filled with assassination attempts, lucky escapes that have become local folklore, and his leadership skills. Many times, Imam Shamil’s forces were plundered and pushed back, but he was always able to regain strength and rally enough warriors to bring the heat back to the Tsarist forces. In one instance, Imam Shamil was the only one left alive in the battle of Gimry in 1832, where his predecessor and close friend, “First Imam” of Dagestan, Kazi Mullah died. In 1834 Imam Shamil gained his title after Kazi Mullah’s successor, Khamza Bek, was murdered and he was nominated by popular demand to the position.<sup>40</sup> However, his position did not come with full authority.

Only being elected by religious figures in his village, the newly minted Imam still needed to round up support from some of Khamza Bek’s followers and “defeating local rivals.”<sup>41</sup> After asserting his authority, Shamil went on to “consolidate his power among an assortment of fellow Muslim leaders, some loyal to Russia and others equally resistant to Russian rule and to Shamil’s hegemony.”<sup>42</sup> Imam Shamil sought to gain support not just from the people for or against the

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<sup>38</sup> Lieven, *Chechnya Tombstone of Russian Power*, 224.

<sup>39</sup> Gall, Carlotta, and Thomas De Wall. *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*. 41. London, UK: Pan Books, 1997

<sup>40</sup> Gall and De Wall, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, 41.

<sup>41</sup> King, *The Ghost of Freedom*, 78.

<sup>42</sup> King, *The Ghost of Freedom*, 79.

Russian Empire, but the support of the Muslim world. After many years of conflict through the 1840s and 1850s, historians often agree that Imam Shamil's leadership and organizational abilities had created "something resembling a state in the lands he controlled, a political entity that attracted more and more people."<sup>43</sup> The type of movement he created was ultimately Islamic, recruiting the faithful of different teips, tribes, and Sufi orders. Imam Shamil was also part of the Naqshbandi order of Sufism, which is in contrast with the Qadiriya order that is dominant in Ramzan Kadyrov's regime today. Regardless of the order which a leader belongs to, the political organizations and moral codes brought in by Sufism helped create a brotherhood not on "the fact that they were all committed anti-Russians but that they were committed Muslims."<sup>44</sup> In short, Imam Shamil had brought many mountain groups together despite traditional Chechen *adats* that created variations of Islam in the hopes to purify the groups to collectively implement Sharia law.

Although Imam Shamil may have been one of the first strongmen with the idea of an independent state, he could also be seen as one of the first traitors, depending on how one perceives his actions at the end of his command. On August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1859, Imam Shamil finally saw that resistance was futile and surrendered by handing in his sword with 50 *murids* to Prince Baratinsky.<sup>45</sup> <sup>46</sup>Afterward, Shamil was brought out to St. Petersburg, celebrated for his actions, and lived the rest of his life out with family in comfort out in Kaluga, just south-west of Moscow. Imam Shamil passed away in 1871.

There would be conflict between this period on up to the October Revolution in 1917, the Bolshevik take-over and a few skirmishes when Stalin brought collectivized agriculture to

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<sup>43</sup> King, *The Ghost of Freedom*, 80-81.

<sup>44</sup> King, *The Ghost of Freedom*, 81.

<sup>45</sup> Gall and De Wall, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, 49.

<sup>46</sup> A murid is a disciple to an order in Sufism.

the region in 1929. The 1944 deportations to Kazakhstan would be the next burn to the Chechen collective memory that would displace many during the latter half of World War II.<sup>47</sup> The generation of Chechens born during the deportations would make up many of the prominent figures in the independence movement to come in the 1990s. General Dudayev, the future first-elected President Aslan Maskhadov, and Kremlin-appointed Akmad-Hadji Kadyrov would be the children of the deportations to become Chechen historical figures who promoted different forms of Chechen identity.

### **Chechen Identity in the Chechen Wars**

In the past three decades, scholars of Chechnya have dedicated time, bravery, and resources to study the Chechen Wars and Chechen identity construction, often revolving around traditional and Islamic values. In *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, Carlotta Gall and Thomas De Wall developed one of the few first-hand accounts on the ground in Chechnya during the First Chechen War in 1994. They developed their narrative that tells the story of war time Chechnya along with historical context to give a base to the separatist movement and the Chechen identity revival that flourished. This identity revival drove Djokhar Dudayev, a Soviet Airforce General, to return home in 1991 and declared Chechnya sovereign, thus “seizing power.”<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, when the first Chechen war commenced in Grozny, Dudayev enunciated a long and deep collective identity that connects all Chechens, requiring the ancient ethos that if a challenge was made against a man or against a nation that rising up was obligatory stating, “This is a war of life or death. All our citizens must know that we have to defend our country with our lives.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Gall and De Wall, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, 57.

<sup>48</sup> Gall and De Wall, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, 32.

<sup>49</sup> Gall and De Wall, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, 193.

## General Djokhar Dudayev

Although not the first in Chechen memory, Djokhar Dudayev became one of many greats to carry the cult of personality in Chechnya. Following in the steps of historical greats such as Sheikh Mansur of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and Imam Shamil of the 19<sup>th</sup>, Dudayev became one of the great leaders to command the region in the 20<sup>th</sup>. A successful product of the Soviet system, an Airforce General who served in the Afghan War and a deportee as a toddler under Stalin's order in 1944, Dudayev carried a lot of backing and a common collective Chechen memory of suffering. Since Dudayev was a product of the Soviet system, he often felt a deep longing for the traditions and customs of his homeland. When the fall of the Soviet Union was inevitable, Dudayev saw his chance to reconnect to his roots, returning home to call for an independent Chechen state. His determination was not based on power or wealth, but rather a strong sense of self, relaying his motivations, "I wasn't looking for power, riches, or duties. I've always just had one idea—to fight for the Chechen people's right to independence. That's my life's goal and I will not shy away from it. Not under any conditions, or any pressure."<sup>50</sup>

A uniquely fashioned individual, Dudayev returned from Estonia, where he commanded an air squadron at a Soviet base in Tartu, to participate in the Congress of Chechen People in November 1990 to relay his thoughts to his countrymen. With passion and gusto, Dudayev declared to them what the Chechen responsibility was, with spectator soon to be VP, Zemlikan Yandarbiyev recalling:

It was a short but very striking speech. He effectively said then that declaring an independent state was an act of great responsibility, something very difficult, but once we had declared it, we should go to the end. He said, using a saying we have, do not draw your *kinzhal* from its case, do not draw it without cause, but if you draw it, do not put it back without doing battle."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Smith, Sebastian. *Allah's Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya*. 128. New York, NY: I.B Tauris Publishers, 2001. [www.ibtauris.com](http://www.ibtauris.com)

<sup>51</sup> Gall and De Wall, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, 76.

Yandarbiyev's recollection of the speech shows that Dudayev was familiar with Chechen warrior culture despite his Soviet upbringing.<sup>52</sup> Chechen Ethnographer Said-Magomed Khasiev supports this ancient cultural reference with his knowledge on the subject, "It was considered a shame and cowardice to draw a weapon at the offender and not strike. Therefore, the Chechens took up arms only in the most extreme cases."<sup>53</sup> With Dudayev's homecoming and successful power seizure, Chechen independence adopted a slogan. This slogan positioned Chechnya against Russian authority, referencing to a higher power, "Chechnya is not a subject of Russia, it is a subject of Allah."<sup>54</sup> As Allah being the prophet of Islamic identification for the Chechen people, the slogan influenced actions towards independence. This slogan brought many Soviet-minded Chechens to come home and accept the reawakened Chechen identity and national thought. The post-Soviet revival of Chechen national identity went hand in hand with the revival of Sufi Islam, often in opposition of Russian dominance in the region.

### **Chechen Sufism**

When discussing about Chechen identity or national thought, two factors must be considered: Islam and the Chechen Adat. First, Chechen Sufism, a mystical form of Islam, will be explained. Keep in mind that the Chechen religious and cultural sphere intertwine and certain facets are interchanged from one to the other in regards to what is considered religious/traditional. In addition, Chechen Sufism is political and often delineates loyalties based on religious group and family affiliation. The importance of these factors in regards to the slogan Akhmat-Sila is tantamount for the fact that the slogan incorporates a religious and a cultural

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<sup>52</sup> Gall and De Wall, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, 76.

<sup>53</sup> Khasiev, Said Magomed. "Некоторые Обычаи Чеченцев." Blog. *Nochalla* (blog), June 9, 2013. <https://nochalla.com/obychai-i-tradicii/1639-nekotorye-obychai-chechentsev>.

<sup>54</sup> Smith, *Allah's Mountains*, 125.

factor that ultimately solidifies the political stability of Ramzan Kadyrov's affiliations. In addition, Kadyrov adds his own practices to his version of Sufism, which often run contradictory to tradition.

Scholars on Chechnya tend to underline Sufism's importance. In *Chechnya A Small Victorious War*, Thomas De Wall explicates the historical importance of Sufism in Chechnya to emphasize the various Islamic interpretations Chechens embodied. De Wall states that Sufism is "...a highly decentralized order, which maintains its unity only through a community of purpose and the practice of simple ritual."<sup>55</sup> Anna Politkovskaya highlights that these orders (the dominant forms being the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya) are broken down into *virds*(brotherhoods), *murids* (disciples), *Uztaz*(teacher), *Mullahs*(Islamic scholars) and *Muftis*(Islamic law scholars).<sup>56</sup> Politkovskaya mentions that one brotherhood stands out politically, the "Kuntahadjin."<sup>57</sup> This decentralization of religion, meaning that there is no central imam or similar figure, separates Chechen Sufism from that of the more centralized orthodox Wahhabism which spread in the Second Chechen War. De Wall's mention of simple ritual refers to the Chechen *Adat*, which differentiates Chechnya's form of Islam from other forms practiced in neighboring Caucasus regions, which will be discussed after Chechen Sufism.

Anatol Lieven expands on this religious uniqueness by developing Chechnya's Islam as a form of ethno-identity. Lieven underscores that this identity forms "...with one formal religious allegiance" that emerges over an unset period of time and strengthens when an outsider invades their region, often of "another religion."<sup>58</sup> In addition, Lieven expands on this idea stating that

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<sup>55</sup> Gall and De Wall, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, 32.

<sup>56</sup> Politkovskaya, Anna. *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya*. Translated by Alexander Burry and Tatiana Tulchinsky. 137. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

<sup>57</sup> Politkovskaya, *A Small Corner of Hell*, 138. This is the brotherhood where Akhmed-Hadji and Ramzan Kadyrov belonged to in the Qadiriya order. In this vird there are 356 saints.

<sup>58</sup> Lieven, *Chechnya Tombstone of Russian Power*, 355-356.



outside forces reinforce the invaded group's "threatened ethnos" to adhere to forms of the religion that will "strengthen military and or/cultural powers of resistance."<sup>59</sup> With caution, Lieven continues that the conflict could generate "new religious forms and institutions."<sup>60</sup> Lieven's statement could help explain the evolution of Sufism in Chechnya in regards to new forms(practices, chants) and institutions(possible pilgrimage site, buildings, etc) in the Kadyrov era.

In *The Effects of War on the Chechen National Identity Construction, National Identities*, Aurélie Campana parses out a few other ideological differences on identity that circulated during the Chechen Wars, listing the following: "the separatists, the radical Islamists, the traditionalists, and the Pro-Russians."<sup>61</sup> Campana defines these "competing models of group identification" as an "identity narrative."<sup>62</sup> Some scholars define this identity narrative as a "Competition between elites and the resulting selection or invention of symbols induces the politisation[sic] of culture, and the changing of self-definition within the community."<sup>63</sup> The invention of symbols is still relevant for the fact that Ramzan Kadyrov's form of Chechen identity construction revolves around this change of definition and symbolization of his father and slogan.

At the outset of the Chechen Wars, there were many groups that practiced different ideologies and programs. Each group had different moral codes(adat) and ideological/ religious convictions. The separatists' main goal was an independent secular state with continued financial ties to the Russian Federation. This group would consist of General Dudayev, field commander and future Chechen president Aslan Maskadov until the Second Chechen War, and the Chechens

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<sup>59</sup> Lieven, *Chechnya Tombstone of Russian Power*, 356.

<sup>60</sup> Lieven, *Chechnya Tombstone of Russian Power*, 356.

<sup>61</sup> Campana, Aurélie. "The Effects of War on the Chechen National Identity Construction." *National Identities* 8, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608940600703759>.

<sup>62</sup> Campana, *The Effects of War on the Chechen National Identity Construction*, 131.

<sup>63</sup> Campana, *The Effects of War on the Chechen National Identity Construction*, 131.

who supported the short-lived Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.<sup>64</sup> The radical Islamists wanted not only sovereignty, but total financial independence and the creation of a sharia-abiding Islamic state. Field commander/terrorist Shamil Basayev, would rank top gun in this group, going to the extent of multiple attacks across Russia. These attacks included the week-long Budyonnovsk hospital hold up, the Beslan school siege with 300 deaths, and the seizure of a theater in Moscow resulting in 120 deaths.<sup>65</sup> <sup>66</sup> The traditionalists wanted independence, but to revert back to rule to the old Chechen clans, called teips, which governed the region based on family relations.<sup>67</sup>

However, James Hughes argues that the teip's traditional meanings and substance have changed over the centuries due to "military conquest, genocide, deportation, and commercialization."<sup>68</sup> Inevitably, there will be changes to any kind of structure given the generational traumas experienced by whole groups of people. The implications after years of conflict, the systemic killing of one's countrymen, and the forceful removal from ancestral lands would cause many changes that may never recover. In addition, commercialization creates an economic factor that was not present in the resistance of Imam Shamil, industry in the lowlands. Opportunity brought many highlanders to the plains in search of financial stability.

Taking these factors into consideration, the modern definition of what makes up a teip refers to extended familial connections. Teip confederations or agreements are called *turqum*, that can also result in political clientelism, and can overlap with some groups. The Kadyrov family would overlap into this group with their expansive Kunta-Hadji following benoy teip,

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<sup>64</sup> Aslan Maskhadov changed sides in 1999 when he decided to side with Shamil Basayev, a rebel commander who did not side with the Russians.

<sup>65</sup> Meyers, Steve Lee. "Video: Chechen Rebel Chief Is Killed." *The New York Times*, July 10, 2006, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/1194817115032/chechen-rebel-chief-is-killed.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Politkovskaya, Anna, and John Crowfoot. *A Dirty War*. 27. London, UK: The Harvill Press, 2001.

<sup>67</sup> For the sake of non-repetition, teip will not be included in the adat section as teips often run along vird lines, which are religious.

<sup>68</sup> Hughes, James. *Chechnya From Nationalism to Jihad*. 3. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

consisting of about 15% of the Chechen population.<sup>69</sup> The final group, the Pro-Russians, is the group that Mufti Akmad-Hadji Kadyrov, Ramzan's father, was the leader.

Since taking control, Ramzan Kadyrov has his own twists to Sufism. The basis for his Sufism variation is based on historical roots to the Qadiriya order's veneration of Kunta-Hadji, one of the order's grandest disciples. In RFE/RL, Liz Fuller states that "Kunta-Hadji advocated the acceptance of infidel Russian domination in order to avert the extinction of the Chechen nation in an endless war against the Tsarist regime."<sup>70</sup> Fuller's statement provides a historical-religious basis for why Akhmad-Hadji's decided to side with the Kremlin and why Ramzan venerates his father as a saint. Sufism expert Vakhit Akayev has agreeing views of the decision, comparing Akhmad-Hadji to Imam Shamil, stating, "Even the great Imam Shamil in the end gave himself up and lived in comfort at the tsar's court in St Petersburg."<sup>71</sup> Akhmad-Hadji's similar actions to Kunta-Hadji's creates a connection that Kadyrov can use to strengthen his slogan, Akhmat-Sila, demonstrating the religious and historical meaning enveloped into it while twisting it.

This sanctification of Akhmad-Hadji has led to heretical practices not seen in other versions of Islam. Kadyrov included the Christian practice of Holy water. Fuller shines light on Kadyrov's practice, using "Cisterns containing 'holy water' from the chalice, liberally diluted with tap water, have been delivered throughout Chechnya in light of its imputed miraculous healing and reconciliatory properties, even though the Christian concept of 'holy water' is totally

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<sup>69</sup> Marten, Kimberly. *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States*. Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 2012.

<sup>70</sup> Fuller, Liz. "Kadyrov's 'Chechen Sufism' Accommodates Christmas Trees, 'Holy Water.'"

RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, January 16, 2012.

[https://www.rferl.org/a/kadyrovs\\_chechen\\_sufism\\_accomodates\\_christmas\\_trees\\_holy\\_water/24453480.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/kadyrovs_chechen_sufism_accomodates_christmas_trees_holy_water/24453480.html).

<sup>71</sup> Parfitt, Tom. "Sufism and Wahhabism in Chechnya." *The Guardian*, November 22, 2007, sec. World news.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/nov/22/chechnya.tomparfitt>.

alien to Islam.”<sup>72</sup> Islam in general does not venerate anyone other than God, which differs from Orthodoxy and Catholicism, which regularly venerate and canonize saints along with anointing with holy water. Fuller continues to create a religious sphere of contrasts, dichotomizing that “Salafis reject such elements of Sufism as the worship of Sufi saints and pilgrimages to holy places (“ziyart”).<sup>73</sup> These holy places can be found throughout Chechnya with Akhmad-Hadji’s image present and are “geared to redefining what is aesthetically and culturally acceptable under Chechen tradition.”<sup>74</sup>

On the contrary, some mock this morphing of the aesthetic. On October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020, YouTube channel 1Adat presents an unnamed man in a montage with a counter to shed light on the slogan and the absurdness of a flower laying ceremony at a monument dedicated to Akhmat-Hadji. In the summary of the video, the author gives a statement, “A video that clearly demonstrates that Kadyrov's criminals have nothing to do with Islam. They have their own Akhmat religion, they worship the apostate Akhmat who has rotted in the grave and praise him and not the Almighty, or they praise him more than the Almighty.”<sup>75</sup> This statement against Kadyrov’s practices demonstrate that some young people are not accepting what he ritualizes. Despite what adherents believers think, Kadyrov has been creating favorable conditions for his imposed brand of Sufism to build up the veneration of Akhmad-Hadji over time, which has proliferated into a slogan.

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<sup>72</sup> Fuller, Kadyrov’s Chechen Sufism, Website.

<sup>73</sup> Fuller, Kadyrov’s Chechen Sufism, Website.

<sup>74</sup> Fuller, Liz, and Aslan Doukaev. “Kadyrov Uses ‘Folk Islam’ For Political Gain.” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, December 6, 2007. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1079237.html>.

<sup>75</sup> 1Adat. Новая Религия Кадыровцев, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpG46fYg7Q>.

## Chechen Adat

The second aspect of traditional/contemporary Chechen identity is the *adat*, the dominating rule of law by customs and traditions. The *adat* existed before Islam took a foothold in the Caucasus region. Surprisingly, when Islam did become widespread, the *adat* was intertwined to create a unique variant of Islam in the Sufi tradition, making *adat* and Chechen Islam inseparable. Due to Chechnya's unique position with ancient culture and religion, a form of saintly worship has arisen known as Kadyrovism,<sup>76</sup> which today influences Ramzan Kadyrov's slogan, Akhmat-Sila, by giving it cultural credence that coincides with the religious. Joshua Yaffa's interview with a local Mufti confirms this influences noting that deputy mufti Usman Osmaev said, "What he has achieved is that we have returned to our roots: in religion, *adat*, culture."<sup>77</sup> Setting the religious aspect aside, Chechen *adat* follows a moral code that governed Chechens before Islam and often still govern them now.

Scholars agree along similar lines on what makes up the Chechen *adat*. In the eye-witness account *Allah's Mountains*, Sebastian Smith mentions the *adat* as "For rules of behavior, Chechens instead look to their own folk laws, such as the vendetta, hospitality, and the authority of elders."<sup>78</sup> James Hughes gives importance to the *adat* stating that Chechen "...customary law prevailed over strict observance of Islamic law, and where blood feuds and hostage-taking was the norm."<sup>79</sup> Anna Politkovskaya explains *adat* as, "the rules of Chechen life of the pre-Islamic period—which tend to preach family, neighborly, and communal values."<sup>80</sup> Andrew Meier underscores *adat* as "The principle rules and regulations of society," in which was revived after

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<sup>76</sup> To learn more see: Politkovskaya, Anna. *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya*. Translated by Alexander Burry and Tatiana Tulchinsky. 137. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

<sup>77</sup> Yaffa, Joshua. "The Putin of Chechnya." *The New Yorker*, February 15, 2016.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/08/putins-dragon>.

<sup>78</sup> Smith, *Allah's Mountains*, xxxiii.

<sup>79</sup> Hughes, *Chechnya From Nationalism to Jihad*, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Politkovskaya, *A Small Corner of Hell*, 137.

seven decades of Soviet rule at the start of the First Chechen War.<sup>81</sup> Outsider views on the adat tend to agree with each other with few variations, but an insider perspective is warranted to develop a more holistic view of the adat.

In *The Oath*, Alkhan-Kala native Hassan Baiev explains the importance of Chechen tradition in war, asserting that “Women usually cover their heads with scarves outside on the street—such traditions help to preserve our culture. Without them, we will disappear as a nation; our traditions are the glue that hold us together, especially in chaotic times when everything is falling apart.”<sup>82</sup> Baiev also demonstrates a code of silence in his university years when confronted by a KGB agent to snitch on his sport mates, “Being an informant was counter to all Chechen traditions.”<sup>83</sup> Lieven encounters a similar situation in Chechnya in regards to revealing traditions. Lieven states that some conservative natives “who have remained closest to such traditions, have a great unwillingness to talk about them...,” meaning that silence is not only for friends, but for group traditions as well.<sup>84</sup>

Independence and freedom run deep in traditional Chechen identity. The Chechen language has a term for it, called *k’uonakh*. In a study, Murat Ilyasov’s Chechen informant defines the term as:

K’uonakh – is a person who respects elders, who takes care of his family and neighbors, who helps and protects the weak, who observes and defends moral values. He should be modest, but brave. This is not even one percent of the qualities a k’uonakh should possess. Briefly, he is an ideal person or a role-model for everybody. If you are a k’uonakh, you are a real Chechen. Oh, yes, it is important..., you cannot be a k’uonakh unless you are an oesdan [free, noble –Chechen] person.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Meier, Andrew. *To The Heart Of A Conflict CHECHNYA*. 6. New York-London: W.W. Norton, 2005.

<sup>82</sup> Baiev, Khassan. *The Oath: A Surgeon under Fire*. Translated by N Daniloff and R Daniloff. New York, NY: Walker, 2003.

<sup>83</sup> Baiev, *The Oath*, 59.

<sup>84</sup> Lieven, *Chechnya Tombstone of Russian Power*, 342.

<sup>85</sup> Ilyasov, Marat. “Chechen Ethnic Identity: Assessing the Shift from Resistance to Submission: Middle Eastern Studies: Vol 54, No 3.” *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 3 (January 16, 2016): 482.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2018.1423967>

From this definition, some notable aspects of traditional Chechen identity revolve around good will, observance and maintenance of moral values, and most of all, being a free being, building off the word, “Oesdan”.<sup>86</sup> The opposite term, “lai,” is a slave and one who will enslave others, but can also mean someone “taken prisoner or an outsider.”<sup>87 88</sup> Tony Wood emphasizes this idea that the “concept of freedom has pride and[sic] place in Chechen culture as the language itself testifies, noting that the basic greeting translates “enter into freedom and the term for the word freedom in Chechen, “marsho,” has a broad meaning in “peace and well-being.”<sup>89</sup> These Chechen words, often used meaningfully in traditional Chechen culture to relay the importance of freedom, would come to serve as a contrast to the Chechen society of today, in which freedom is redefined by Akhmad-Hadji Kadyrov and then later developed by his son, Ramzan Kadyrov through his slogan Akhmat-Sila and Akhmad-Hadji’s acceptance of Russian backing for Chechnya remaining Russian territory.

### **Akmad-Hadji Kadyrov**

Akmad-Hadji Kadyrov was a Chechen born out of the deportations who became a martyr with his assassination in 2004. Rather than being born in Chechnya and living through the Stalinist deportations, he was born a few years later in Kanhara, Kazakhstan in 1951, returning to Chechnya with his parents in 1957.<sup>90</sup> During his time in Kazakhstan to 1980, much is unclear and not much is written about Akmad-Hadji’s life between those dates other than his studying of agriculture. Akmad-Hadji dove into religious studies during the 1980s of Gorbachev’s glasnost of the USSR in various locations to include Tashkent and Bukhara in Uzbekistan and in Jordan

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<sup>86</sup> Free, noble Chechen.

<sup>87</sup> Iliyasov, Chechen Ethnic Identity, 483.

<sup>88</sup> Wood, Tony. *Chechnya the Case for Independence*. 14. New York, NY: Verso Books, 2007.

<sup>89</sup> Wood, *Chechnya the Case for Independence*, 13.

<sup>90</sup> Traynor, Ian. “Obituary: Akhmad Kadyrov.” *The Guardian*, May 10, 2004, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2004/may/10/guardianobituaries.russia>.

and Oman.<sup>91</sup> With his religious education, Akhmad-Hadji went on to develop the first Islamic studies center in Chechnya after the fall of the USSR and became the grand Mufti during Dudayev's regime in Chechnya in 1993, thus calling the famous "jihad" against Russia in 1995 in the First Chechen War.<sup>92</sup> However, it was the elder Kadyrov's reversal to side with Moscow that brought in the new era of changes for the region. Going against the grain of the Chechen tradition of freedom, Akhmad-Hadji fell in line with Lieven's prediction for Chechnya's future, foreshadowing, "The tensions between these old and new worlds in Chechnya will determine the country's future."<sup>93</sup>

Although Akhmad-Hadji was pro-Chechen independence in the First Chechen War, he changed loyalties in the Second. Joshua Yaffa received some perspective on the Mufti from a former Chechen separatist minister named Ilyas Akhmadov while on a visit. Akhmadov stated, "He sincerely believed that he was saving the Chechen people from certain death."<sup>94</sup> This change in loyalty led some scholars to note that this break of affiliation caused "Wahhabist[sic] rebel leader Shamil Basayev put a price on Akmad's head at \$100,000," and then former Chechen President Maskadov, who dropped the elder Kadyrov as Grand Mufti in 1999 due to sectarian antagonisms, topped Basayev with a bounty of "\$250,000."<sup>95</sup> On the contrary, in an official interview for the late-Mufti's would be 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, President Putin remembered his change of heart as a wise decision:

It is no secret now that in the mid-1990s, he took part in the hostilities on the other side. He later switched sides because he changed his view on what was happening in Chechnya and in Russia as a whole. He did not go over to the Russian side because he was scared. He wasn't scared of fighting or of anything else – I just mentioned how brave he was. He

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<sup>91</sup> Traynor, Obituary: Akhmad Kadyrov, Website.

<sup>92</sup> Traynor, Obituary: Akhmad Kadyrov, Website.

<sup>93</sup> Lieven, Chechnya Tombstone of Russian Power, 29.

<sup>94</sup> Yaffa, Joshua. "The Putin of Chechnya." The New Yorker, February 15, 2016.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/08/putins-dragon>.

<sup>95</sup> Wood, Case for Independence, 108.



came to the conclusion that it was time to put an end to that fratricidal war, that civil war in Russia. And he sincerely believed that Chechnya should remain with Russia – that’s what he told me many times. He sensed that need, being a religious leader.<sup>96</sup>

In Ramzan Kadyrov’s regime, a critical civil servant agrees with Putin’s statement, saying, “He was courageous, though he won’t go down in history as a hero of his people.....He was smart. He didn’t lick the Russians’ boots. He wouldn’t have made a Putin Prospekt or founded a Putin fan club.”<sup>97</sup> These views provide a clearer image into the shift and a sense of credibility to the elder Kadyrov’s character. Then, the late Novaya Gazeta reporter Anna Politkovskaya decided to get the information from the Mufti directly.

On July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2000 In *A Dirty War*, Anna Politkovskaya interviewed the elder Kadyrov and explored his thoughts on Chechen independence and his call to jihad in the first war.<sup>98</sup> This interview was one of the first to bring the Kadyrov family to light, possibly foreshadowing how the next 20 years will proceed in Chechnya. The elder Kadyrov gives his new view and definition on independence, which seems to contradict the traditional view to Chechen identity and freedom:

Hence my main goal today: the nation must no longer be left stranded half-way; no longer must it be deceived by this “independence” and “liberty” that no one has ever actually given us and never will. Freedom, in fact, is something the ordinary man- and I count myself one, I come from a modest peasant family- does not need. He needs work and in return a wage and security.<sup>99</sup>

Anna Politkovskaya’s interview highlights one of the key shifts in Chechen identity and Russian policy in Chechnya. Akhmad-Hadji emphasizes that instead of letting “our warrior instinct and ourselves to be exploited” for the sake of true freedom, speaks of a relative freedom.<sup>100</sup> This

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<sup>96</sup> “Председатель Правительства Российской Федерации В.В.Путин дал интервью, приуроченное к 60-летию А.-Х.Кадыева.” Government. Accessed January 26, 2021. <http://archive.government.ru/eng/docs/16273/print/>.

<sup>97</sup> Kim, Lucian. “In the Name of the Father.” *Lucian Kim* (blog), October 4, 2013. <https://www.luciankim.com/blogs/gonzo-goes-to-grozny/name-father/>.

<sup>98</sup> Politkovskaya, Anna, and John Crowfoot. *A Dirty War*. 192. London, UK: The Harvill Press, 2001.

<sup>99</sup> Politkovskaya and Crowfoot, *A Dirty War*, 194.

<sup>100</sup> Politkovskaya and Crowfoot, *A Dirty War*, 194.

definition change of freedom would stop the violence and bring work and security to the population, with Kadyrov underscoring “that will be freedom for Chechnya” and not a “phony freedom.”<sup>101</sup> Possibly, he was tired from war and the decimation of the Chechen population and Moscow knew his sentiments.

Sebastian Smith highlights a similar sentiment to Akhmad-Hadji’s while he was in Chechnya. Smith quotes his Chechen driver when they saw a flag with “Freedom-1991” written on it, grumbling, “What freedom are they talking about? Freedom is when you’ve got a little bit of money in your pocket and we haven’t had that for years now.”<sup>102</sup> Smith’s driver’s resentment strikes a chord with the traditional Chechen sense of freedom, showing a shift of the definition that aligns with Akhmad-Hadji’s. The chief mufti was not alone in his want for financial stability and peace over full sovereignty. This shift brought all the other Chechen groups that Campana listed previously under the umbrella of enemies of the state.

This blanketing of anti-Russian separatist groups made Akhmad-Hadji’s Pro-Russian forces the sole legitimate authority in Chechnya. Akhmad-Hadji’s Kremlin-approved authority helped him consolidate power and legitimize his son Ramzan Kadyrov’s militia, the Kadyrovtsy. The Second Chechen War was in full effect, handing off Moscow’s control of operations to the Kadyrov family.<sup>103</sup> This handing off of operational authority from Federal to locally-led forces would be coined Chechenisation, meaning that Kadyrov has autonomous control, to include control over the FSB on the counter-insurgency with full financial support from Moscow for weapons, stipends, and state security.

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<sup>101</sup> Politkovskaya and Crowfoot, *A Dirty War*, 194.

<sup>102</sup> Smith, *Allah’s Mountains*, 123.

<sup>103</sup> Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States*, 109.

## Akmad-Hadji's Death and Ramzan's Rise To Power

Akmad-Hadji Kadyrov went to paradise when he perished at the then Dinamo Stadium during a May 9<sup>th</sup> Victory Day parade “in a bomb attack by secessionists in 2004.”<sup>104</sup> Akmad-Hadji's death fit more the description of a political assassination, but the details can be conflicting between the Russian State or Chechen jihadi responsibility. Many analysts think that Shamil Basayev or Aslan Maskhadov were responsible, but, some disagree due to the nature of the explosive and the technicalities required to set the device properly.<sup>105</sup> Maskhadov, although at great odds with Akhmad-Hadji for years before his death, the day after the bombing denied any involvement, stating “Violence will never solve our problems.”<sup>106</sup> Other analysts believe rather than claiming one problem for the event, that its roots ran deeper from the exclusion of other Chechen clans into the government.<sup>107</sup> Regardless of who killed the Pro-Russian head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov was ready to lead his Kadyrovtsy on the offensive. Although too young to be appointed the head of the region, Ramzan Kadyrov was able to take the position of vice premier until he reached the age of 30, the legal age of appointment in the Russian constitution. Instead, the former MVD chief, Alu Alkhanov came into the Chechen presidency with Kremlin-backed Potemkin style elections.<sup>108 109</sup>

The son Kadyrov did not stay long in his vice premier position. With a series of unfortunate events within the administration, he claimed the seat in parliament for the United Russia party and then, rose to Prime Minister after the acting MP, Sergei Abramov, was

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<sup>104</sup> King, *The Ghost of Freedom*, 239.

<sup>105</sup> Volchek, Dmitri. “‘Рамзан Знает, Что Его Отца Убила ФСБ’. Разговор с Врагом Кадырова.” RFE/RL, July 7, 2019. <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/30041325.html>.

<sup>106</sup> Mite, Valentinas. “Russia: Kadyrov's Death A Blow To Kremlin's Chechnya Policy.” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, May 10, 2004. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1052715.html>.

<sup>107</sup> Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States*, 109.

<sup>108</sup> Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States*, 110.

<sup>109</sup> MVD, министерство внутри дел, Ministry of Internal Affairs.

seriously injured in a car wreck and decided to forgo the position and hand it off to Ramzan, deeming it was the “most appropriate.”<sup>110</sup> Rather, it was Putin’s political promise to Ramzan coming to fruition, with his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday already passed in October 2006. Not surprisingly, the acting President Alu Alkhanov suddenly resigned, opening the window to the young and ambitious Kadyrov without delay, allowing Putin an earlier chance to appoint him to the position before he could be officially set in stone with a “popular election.”<sup>111</sup> After gaining the presidency, Kadyrov changed the Chechen constitution giving him unlimited terms to rule. This is when Kadyrov would start to apply heavy pressure to the jihadis and in the process, rack up multiple human-rights violations along the way.<sup>112</sup>

In *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States*, Kimberly Marten labels Ramzan a Warlord, which Marten defines as “individuals who control small pieces of territory using a combination of force and patronage.”<sup>113</sup> Furthering the definition for the modern strongman, Marten adds, “Warlords rule in defiance of genuine state sovereignty but through the complicity of state leaders.”<sup>114</sup> Here the complicit leader is President Vladimir Putin. Once Kadyrov took power in 2007, for a few years he went on the offensive. Kadyrov annihilated rival factions, weeded out jihadis, took drastic measures to abduct their family members to bring them out from hiding, arson, and public humiliation on local television.

Surprisingly, Kadyrov did offer a level of clemency to the rebels, often offering the captured rebel a chance to flip to his Pro-Russia side. Kadyrov then would patronize the rebel or family member changing affiliations. On one occasion, the father of a Chechen terrorist who

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<sup>110</sup> Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States*, 110.

<sup>111</sup> Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States*, 111.

<sup>112</sup> Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States*, 112.

<sup>113</sup> Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States*, 3.

<sup>114</sup> Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States*, 3.

took part in the 2002 Moscow theater massacre asked Kadyrov if he could return to Chechnya so he could live out the rest of his life in peace and die at home. Kadyrov granted his wish, then patronized him with a “banquet, a car, and financial support.”<sup>115</sup> The level of support we cannot be sure about or how sincere the clemency was since this affirmation came from a Kadyrov arranged press-interview, meaning little to all could have been fabricated, or just enough money would be doled out to keep the recipient quiet. The main point of this act is that to a wider population, Kadyrov comes off as the benevolent leader of Chechnya, bringing law and order with an iron fist, but soft enough to offer rehabilitation to Chechens who may have strayed from the Pro-Russian Kadyrov Chechen ideal.

Ramzan Kadyrov would continue his warlord tactics of persuasion by force and patronage for years to come, although the Federal Russian government officially declared the Chechen “counterterrorism” campaign complete in April 2009.<sup>116</sup> However, the reality of the counterinsurgency did not end for many Chechens. With the majority or the insurgents pushed out of Chechnya, annihilated, or captured and converted to Kadyrov’s side, Kadyrov developed a force more intimidating than the FSB. Many Chechens faced extrajudicial punishment, torture, psychological anguish, and death during these operations, with the sole accusation of being a “bandit” or being the family of one.<sup>117</sup> The Kadyrovtsy militia conducted these notorious operations with near impunity from the Russian government.

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<sup>115</sup> Marten, *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States*, 112.

<sup>116</sup> Koch, Bettina. *State Terror, State Violence: Global Perspectives*. 147. Springer, 2015.  
[https://www.google.com/books/edition/State\\_Terror\\_State\\_Violence/s3E3CwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=the+kadyrovtsy&pg=PA147&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/State_Terror_State_Violence/s3E3CwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=the+kadyrovtsy&pg=PA147&printsec=frontcover).

<sup>117</sup> Souleimanov, Emil. “An Ethnography of Counterinsurgency: Kadyrovtsy and Russia’s Policy of Chechenization.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 2 (March 4, 2015): 91–114.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2014.900976>.

## The Kadyrovtsy

Ramzan Kadyrov's militia, the Kadyrovtsy, as Koch describes, consists of "ex-rebels, criminals, and inexperienced hopefuls."<sup>118</sup> In the group's origins, many of the original fighters were part of the Kadyrov teip, the Benoi and those with familial relations. Then, when Akhmad Kadyrov sided with Moscow for autonomy and financing to rebuild Chechnya, the ranks started to swell with a wider variation of recruitment. For many of the ex-rebels, joining the ranks of the Kadyrovtsy was their only way out from being hunted down by Kadyrov and providing practical safety from FSB operatives. Akhmad-Hadji's ability to turn the enemy to his side due to cultural connections and knowledge was key to leveraging former hostility to his advantage.

Chechen rebels groups in the Second Chechen War were tight-knit units and knew each other from the First Chechen War, many of which had large extended families. Due to these regional networks, resistance was futile for self-preservation and the prevention of unfavorable consequences to extended family members. Ramzan Kadyrov was able to tap into these social connections within clan society to use the Kadyrovtsy efficiently to target and single-out rebels. Previously, Moscow chose Akmad Kadyrov for these personal connections to the insurgency and his ability to go around the clan "taboo" of talking about internal affairs with Russian outsiders.<sup>119</sup> The Kadyrovtsy were so successful at flipping the rebels that during the beginning of the counterinsurgency the militia consisted of more or less "three-fourths" of flipped men.<sup>120</sup>

Notoriously, the Kadyrovtsy received their reputation during this counterinsurgency period. Joshua Yaffa highlights why rebel fighters were scared with a 2009 local TV interview

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<sup>118</sup> Koch, *State Terror, State Violence: Global Perspectives*, 147-148.

<sup>119</sup> Souleimanov, Emil. "An Ethnography of Counterinsurgency: Kadyrovtsy and Russia's Policy of Chechenization." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 2 (March 4, 2015): 91-114.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2014.900976>.

<sup>120</sup> Koch, *State Terror, State Violence: Global Perspectives*, 147-148.

where Kadyrov berated some rebels, “You want to kill people? You kill my comrades, I’ll kill your father, your brother, all your pets.”<sup>121</sup> Although the arbitrary home raid kidnappings of suspected terrorists, opposition politicians, and suspected supporters were more precise than their Russian counterparts during the “zachistki,” which brought all Chechen men between 15 and 55 to filtration camps, were very aggressive to the point of total submission or death. Other than Chechens carrying out these operations, there was not much to differentiate them from the previous Federal Russian operations. The collective punishment was inevitable and the militia would terrorize many innocent Chechens along the way.<sup>122</sup>

One illustrative example of these far reaching Kadyrovtsy actions was when they searched for the former Maskhadov Defense Minister, Magomed Khambiev. The militia went so far that they rounded up and tortured “80 of his family members,” leading to his surrender.<sup>123</sup> Yaffa highlights Kadyrov’s effectiveness when Khambiev relayed what Ramzan told him, “Ramzan said to me, ‘Think about it—I am giving you the chance to live in peace.’”<sup>124</sup> As a result, Khambiev wanted peace. Afterward, he was given a law enforcement leadership position in Kadyrov’s regime. In due time, many Chechens labeled the Kadyrovtsy as “perhaps more horrible than the federals.”<sup>125</sup> The federals in this context serves to describe the Russian state security and military armed forces not under Kadyrov’s command. Unlike the federals, the Kadyrovtsy ability to blend in with their own population, utilize personal connections, and impose internal clan knowledge that by the Chechen *adat* was taboo to speak about with the

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<sup>121</sup> Yaffa, Joshua. “The Putin of Chechnya.” *The New Yorker*, February 15, 2016.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/08/putins-dragon>.

<sup>122</sup> Hughes, *Chechnya From Nationalism to Jihad*, 120.

<sup>123</sup> Hughes, *Chechnya From Nationalism to Jihad*, 120.

<sup>124</sup> Yaffa, The Putin of Chechnya, Website.

<sup>125</sup> Souleimanov, Emil. “An Ethnography of Counterinsurgency: Kadyrovtsy and Russia’s Policy of Chechenization.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 2 (March 4, 2015): 91–114.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2014.900976>.

federals, could be communicated to the militia and directly to Kadyrov to weed out family members, some mired in personal conflicts, and to settle a blood feud with impunity.

Over time, the Kadyrovtsy merged with official federal forces, becoming their own legitimate battalion(s). In 2015, according to the Moscow Times, the Kadyrovtsy numbered at a massive 20,000 soldiers.<sup>126</sup> This approximation places the group at a size between a division and a corps, not quite an official army, but nevertheless quite a formidable force, with many members having years of combat experience. A year later, Mark Galeotti raised the number to around 30,000.<sup>127</sup> The Kadyrovtsy are rumored to be ready to carry out hits on Putin's adversaries, with the highest profile hit being Boris Nemtsov, a former Moscow Mayor and opposition politician, gunned down in broad daylight in front of the Kremlin. Kadyrov denied involvement, but overtly shows his support of Putin, "As long as Putin backs me up I can do everything, God is great!"<sup>128</sup>

Even as a so called legitimate federal force, Putin has no real control of the Chechen armed forces nor its commander. The Kadyrovtsy pledge only to serve one man—Ramzan Kadyrov. On April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, Kadyrov even went as far to declare on local television that if any federal forces come into his region without permission that he has given the order to his men to "shoot to kill."<sup>129</sup> Today, this group is more or less spread out through other armed forces with Zamid Chelaeve<sup>130</sup> commanding the Kadyrovtsy and СОБР Текек being led by one of Kadyrov's

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<sup>126</sup> Galeotti, Mark. "Could Kadyrov Replace Putin?" The Moscow Times, March 22, 2015.

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/03/22/could-kadyrov-replace-putin-a45003>.

<sup>127</sup> Galeotti, Mark. "How Vladimir Putin Is Being Outfoxed by a Chechen Warlord." Vox, July 11, 2016.

<https://www.vox.com/2016/7/11/12148922/vladimir-putin-ramzan-kadyrov-chechnya>.

<sup>128</sup> Koch, *State Terror, State Violence: Global Perspective*, 147.

<sup>129</sup> RFE/RL. "Russia Slams 'Shoot to Kill' Order." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, April 23, 2015.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/kadyrov-authorizes-shooting-of-security-oustide-chechnya/26974169.html>.

<sup>130</sup> See more of Chelaeve on Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BS9YAjFBFu/>



war-time comrades, Abuzaid Vismuradov, also known by nom de guerre “Patriot” commanding the force.<sup>131 132</sup>

The Chechen armed forces(which can all be Kadyrovtsy), although seeming exceptionally thuggish, represent a path for ordinary Chechen men who may not be as fortunate or as talented as some of Kadyrov’s prized fighters to represent themselves in the broader warrior tradition. Not only do they represent a culturally respected profession, but they are also able to connect to their past while simultaneously presenting a modern force that would not have been possible without Russian financing. These armed members can act out the character historically imposed and locally accepted by serving the man with the power and the clout to change their lives. Not only is Kadyrov’s relationship with Moscow bringing them status, but it also reinforces centuries-old imaginaries of Chechens as fierce, pious warriors willing to follow their leader to death. No matter how notorious picking up the gun for Kadyrov seems for the Western world, this mutated form of the imagined warrior serves the regime better than the foreign religious influences present in the Second Chechen War.

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<sup>131</sup> Специальная оперативная быстрая реакция, Special operative quick reaction

<sup>132</sup> Vismuradov, Abdulazaid. Social Media. Instagram. Accessed December 14, 2020.  
[https://www.instagram.com/za.vismuradov\\_95/](https://www.instagram.com/za.vismuradov_95/).

## Chapter 2: Recent Research on Ramzan Kadyrov's Social Media

The recent literature regarding Ramzan Kadyrov's social media use spans over the scope of the last 5 to 6 years on his official Instagram account. Although there are not many articles on the topic, the discussion is growing. One of the firsts articles to shed light on the subject with qualitative and quantitative data analysis is Karina Avedissian's *Clerics, weightlifters, and politicians: Ramzan Kadyrov's Instagram as an official project of Chechen memory and identity production*. Avedissian attempts to show how a Chechen strongman is able to utilize an "inherently democratizing technology," to maintain social and political control.<sup>133</sup> This research angle of a Chechen strongman's use of social media is interesting since it goes against the popular study of the populace using it to "reassert themselves and subvert traditional methods of social and political control."<sup>134</sup>

Avedissian's research focuses on discourse analysis on data from 170 Instagram posts on Ramzan Kadyrov's profile (Kadyrov\_95) for a 1-month duration while it existed. In 2017, the *Guardian* reported that U.S. sanctions required Instagram to delete Kadyrov's profile, making Ramzan Kadyrov "the only person on Earth to be kicked off Instagram."<sup>135</sup> His account accidentally reopened in 2018, leading Kadyrov to declare to his pistol, "How many well-aimed, lead 'words' have you told my enemies and to scoundrels while defending my honour, dignity and life," surprising his 3 million estimated followers.<sup>136</sup> Afterward, Instagram caught their slip and reclosed the account.

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<sup>133</sup> Coleman, S., and J. Blumler. 2009. *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice, and Policy*. 166. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>134</sup> Lessig, L. 2006. *Code*. 5. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>135</sup> Roth, Andrew. "Ramzan Kadyrov Toasts His Instagram Return with Ode to Pistol." *the Guardian*, November 15, 2018. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/15/ramzan-kadyrov-toasts-his-instagram-return-with-ode-to-pistol-chechen>

<sup>136</sup> Roth, Ode to Pistol, Website.

Due to this instance, any research that was done on Kadyrov's original account is vital for the growth of the ongoing discussion. Avedissian's research revolves around 3 topics widely seen and used by Kadyrov that shape the national Chechen identity; these forums are on Islam, sport, and government public relations."<sup>137</sup> In the article portion pertaining to Islam, Ramzan Kadyrov can be seen as the defender of Sufi practices against the invasive and foreign Islamic Salafi teachings, reconstructing them as "enemies of Islam" and the need to be annihilated.<sup>138</sup> Avedissian presents Kadyrov's piousness and how he uses his own personal brand to implement "Islamic" teachings more effectively than the Salafi Caucasus Emirate, which were more orthodox in the Salafi School.<sup>139</sup>

The second domain analyzes Kadyrov's use of sports to gain cultural legitimacy worldwide by promoting Chechen combat-sport fighters and a healthy lifestyle through exercise. Avedissian emphasizes that Kadyrov makes it a "political priority" to support the sports culture in Chechnya and bases cohesion on the regional and international arena.<sup>140</sup> Kadyrov facilitates Chechen "masculinity" through contemporary combat-sport competition.<sup>141</sup> Combat-sports also serve as an outlet for young Chechens, many who see this avenue as a recreation of Chechen warrior culture sans war. Baiev highlights this in his memoir during his teenage years, stating, "

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<sup>137</sup> Avedissian, Karena. "Clerics, Weightlifters, and Politicians: Ramzan Kadyrov's Instagram as an Official Project of Chechen Memory and Identity Production." *Caucasus Survey* 4, no. 1 (January 8, 2016): 20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2015.1119998>.

<sup>138</sup> Smirnov, Andrei. "The Kremlin's New Strategy to Build a Pro-Russian Islamic Chechnya." Jamestown.org. Accessed November 17, 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/the-kremlins-new-strategy-to-build-a-pro-russian-islamic-chechnya-2/>.

<sup>139</sup> Vatchagaev, Mairbek. "Moscow Is Trying to Outsmart the Salafis in Chechnya." Jamestown, May 10, 2012. <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-is-trying-to-outsmart-the-salafis-in-chechnya-2/>.

<sup>140</sup> Avedissian, *Clerics, Weightlifters, and Politicians*, 20.

<sup>141</sup> Avedissian, *Clerics, Weightlifters, and Politicians*, 31.

Chechens need to be strong. Our people had learned that from all those years of resisting the Russians” and that “Most men in Chechnya go in for judo, sombo[sic], boxing, and wrestling.”<sup>142</sup>

In the third cultural domain of government public relations, Avedissian underscores Kadyrov’s politics shown through his posts that he has built up credibility and legitimacy with foreign nations and regions of the Russian Federation. Avedissian emphasizes that Kadyrov constantly repeats that the reason they are making such progress is that they need Russia to continue to keep going forward.<sup>143</sup> Avedissian concludes that her findings show Kadyrov’s reconstruction of the three cultural domains of Islam, sport, and government public relations on Instagram give him a moral, institutional and cultural legitimacy that fits into the Kremlin’s narrative for the region against internal threats (Salafi Islam, pro-independence, and human-rights advocates) and external threats (international terrorism and the West), thus being able to safeguard Russia’s national security interests while maintaining regional power.<sup>144</sup>

Avedissian understands that the scope of her research was only on Ramzan Kadyrov’s account. Avedissian explores a small portion of it, which leaves what was not included to the imagination. The research Avedissian did include though is vital now due to Kadyrov’s original account closure. Despite the expected gaps, Avedissian’s research of the three reoccurring cultural domains in Ramzan Kadyrov’s Instagram creates a base for further research on Chechen identity on social media and its development as Kadyrov continues his reign. These elements identified in Avedissian’s work can also be seen to a great extent in Kadyrov’s slogan, Akhmat-Sila.

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<sup>142</sup> Baiev, Hassan. *The Oath: A Surgeon under Fire*. Translated by N Daniloff and R Daniloff. 18-19. New York, NY: Walker, 2003.

<sup>143</sup> Avedissian, *Clerics, Weightlifters, and Politicians*, 35.

<sup>144</sup> Avedissian, *Clerics, Weightlifters, and Politicians*, 39.

Avedissian's work is expanded on a few years later in the article *Dictator's Instagram: personal and political narratives in a Chechen leader's social network*. In this article, Elena Rodina and Dmitri Dligach conduct analytical discursive research wider in scope, but still based on quantitative data on discourse analysis produced by Kadyrov's Instagram account. Instead of three cultural domains and a one month duration as previously, the scope is widened to cover 24 topics found in Kadyrov's 6854 Instagram posts over a 2-and-a-half-month period, thus subgrouping the 24 main topics of interest under 2 different main topics, one that includes all 12 personal topics, the latter containing the remaining 17 public/political topics.<sup>145</sup> Avedissian notes that in the beginning, when Kadyrov first opened his Instagram account, it was more personal in nature with him writing about his mom in a caring tone. In one post showing this caring nature Kadyrov writes "Thanks to my Mom everything was tasty now I have to work."<sup>146</sup> Rodina and Dligach present the evolution of Ramzan Kadyrov's perception on self-identity through a few other political/public themes<sup>147</sup> using a topic model probability rating and how he is a bastion of his culture through his love of "traditional singing and dancing."<sup>148</sup> Much of this tradition singing and dancing come in the form of the Lezginka dance and singing in the form of the Chechen Zikr, a local religious practice with pre-Islamic origins.<sup>149</sup>

Over time, Kadyrov's posts start becoming more political, while his personal posts are framed more frequently politically. Rodina and Dligach conclude that their research will be part of an ongoing discourse and that their scope of research focuses only on Kadyrov's posts. Rodina

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<sup>145</sup> Rodina, Elena, and Dmitriy Dligach. "Dictator's Instagram: Personal and Political Narratives in a Chechen Leader's Social Network." *Caucasus Survey* 7, no. 2 (May 4, 2019): 96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2019.1567145>.

<sup>146</sup> Rodina and Dligach, Dictator's Instagram, 98.

<sup>147</sup> The topics explored are references to government, law religion, work, family and Kadyrov's mother in his posts.

<sup>148</sup> Rodina and Dligach, Dictator's Instagram, 105.

<sup>149</sup> Grozny.Tv. Магомед Кадыров организовал большой зикр в память о Первом Президенте Чечни. Grozny, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Des-kTXONY>.

and Dligach acknowledge that more focused analysis is needed on the commentary, pictures, and videos that are posted from others onto Kadyrov's posts. They leave out that the same type of research can be seen inversely, such as the amount of times the Chechen leader appears in a regular citizen's posts on Instagram or other popular social media platforms. Next I will breakdown a journal article that focused on traditional forms of media.

In *Seeking Chechen Identity between Repression and Self-Determination under the Ramzan Kadyrov Regime*, Gisela Erbsloh reveals a contrary Checheness that does not follow the cult of personality narrative nor tradition. To demonstrate her argument, Erbsloh conducts 30 interviews of Chechens along with a thematic analysis of two regional publications: Dosh and Zhenskoe Slovo.<sup>150</sup> Most importantly, Erbsloh does not take an academic angle to her research, but rather just presents it as an outlet to amplify non-conforming Chechen voices. Knowing that opposition to the Kadyrov narrative is inherently dangerous, the names of the people interviewed are anonymized to protect their identities. Erbsloh emphasizes that not all Chechen's fell into the Kadyrov status-quo and that there is an active yet small civil society in the authoritarian state. Many of these activists-journalists work in media outlets, non-government organizations, and academia. However, this counter narrative treads a thin line that often leads to trouble for some of Chechnya's inhabitants.

Dosh published the unfortunate situation of one of Chechnya's inhabitants who went against Kadyrov's control of historical memory, Ruslan Kataev. Kataev was imprisoned when he attempted to gather historians at the Grozny National Library to discuss the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Stalin's deportations of 1944 of Chechens to Kazakhstan. When Kataev refused to stop his gathering, Kadyrov's authorities falsified charges to imprison him, fired the library director,

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<sup>150</sup> Now, Dosh has an online platform called <https://tvrain.ru/>. The old site name, doshdu.ru, does not exist anymore.

and cancelled future intellectual meetings at the library. Erbslöh and another interviewee agree with issue no.47 of Dosh's publishing of Kataev's trial statement that a free Chechen is an imprisoned one, with Kataev stating:

I was born with a pronounced instinct for freedom and an absolute sense of justice and honor. I, an experienced politician and political analyst, repeat here in this cage: I am a free Chechen. I know that in the course of history there have always been troubled times, and in times of trouble we have to pay for the convictions that we as citizens hold. And that is why I am here.<sup>151</sup>

Kataev's statement demonstrates the quagmire of not only himself, but of Chechens as a whole in the Kadyrov regime. This conviction expands to all those who do not see Kadyrov's new Chechnya in high regards and the price that will be paid to hold on to these convictions.

Erbslöh persuades the reader that much of the destruction caused by the Kadyrov regime has been the destruction of places that could have been reconstructed or renovated, but rather, replaced with the brand new urban landscape that Grozny boasts today.<sup>152</sup> Erbslöh's interview with A Grozny City architect, Balaudi Magomadov underscores that the destruction of original Chechen buildings signifies the erasure of the old Chechnya for the realization of Kadyrov's Chechnya to "restore cleanliness and order."<sup>153</sup> Magomadov, careful with his words, adds "they tore down everything of historical significance" in favor for the new and the beautiful, even if the Kadyrov-approved edifices were not as structurally sound.<sup>154</sup> Magomadov relates this destruction of historically significant buildings as a way for Kadyrov to solidify his regime into memory while the old fades from collective consciousness.

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<sup>151</sup> Erbslöh, Gisela. "Seeking Chechen Identity between Repression and Self-Determination under the Ramzan Kadyrov Regime." *Slavica Publishers* 5, no. 2 (n.d.): 217. [www.jstor.org/stable/24896627](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24896627). Accessed 11 Mar. 2021.

<sup>152</sup> Erbslöh, Seeking Chechen Identity, 210.

<sup>153</sup> Erbslöh, Seeking Chechen Identity, 210.

<sup>154</sup> Erbslöh, Seeking Chechen Identity, 210.

Along with new infrastructure, photos are placed in all establishments to remind the citizens of Grozny and Chechnya of their leaders. Three photos triangulate President Putin as the overall ruler, Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov as the legacy of the New Chechnya, and a photo of Ramzan Kadyrov to acknowledge his “tireless efforts on behalf of the Chechen people.”<sup>155</sup> Although Kadyrov’s efforts to shape the Chechen Identity has been effective for many, especially many of the younger people who were born and grew up in the turmoil of war, his influence is not necessarily the same for the other generations who knew the Chechens of another era. Erbsloh relates this instance with an interview with an educator with the pseudonym Mar’iam Sh.<sup>156</sup>

Mar’iam Sh reminisces on the memory of her grandfather and how in her opinion, was able to give her a “true Chechen upbringing.”<sup>157</sup> Erbslöh highlights this upbringing by listing attributes of Mar’iam Sh’s grandfather stating, “Her grandfather was a highly educated man who survived the Stalin-era Gulag. From him she learned to respect herself and others, and neither to let anyone humiliate her nor to stand by and watch while others are humiliated.”<sup>158</sup> This childhood experience is subjective, but treads a similar line to other Chechen upbringings. Baiev mentions his definition of love growing up due to his upbringing, “I have always understood love as loyalty and support of family, friend; love is education of children; love is helping the elderly.”<sup>159</sup> Loyalty to family, education, and respect to others are areas that resonate in both statements.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Erbslöh, Gisela. “Seeking Chechen Identity between Repression and Self-Determination under the Ramzan Kadyrov Regime.” *Slavica Publishers* 5, no. 2 (n.d.): 209. [www.jstor.org/stable/24896627](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24896627). Accessed 11 Mar. 2021.

<sup>156</sup> Erbslöh, Seeking Chechen Identity, 222.

<sup>157</sup> Erbslöh, Seeking Chechen Identity, 222.

<sup>158</sup> Erbslöh, Seeking Chechen Identity, 210.

<sup>159</sup> Baiev, *The Oath*, 22.

<sup>160</sup> For more in-depth information on Chechen customs and traditions, visit: <http://www.checheninfo.ru/18378-obychai-tradicii-chechencev.html> and <https://nohchalla.com/obychai-i-tradicii/1639-nekotorye-obychai-chechentsev>



Erbsloh successfully identifies that there is a discrepancy on the idea of a true Chechen identity. In today's Chechnya, a skewed version of Chechen identity is promoted, one that aligns with Kadyrov's views of servility and loyalty to his regime. As an educator, Mar'iam Sh does her part to educate young Chechens, but the situation she says is similar to Stalin's time, where all the curriculum is influenced by the head of state. Erbsloh's acknowledges her interviewee's angst and agrees on the struggle, stating that " They have learned to do whatever pleases Kadyrov in order to meet their own material needs."<sup>161</sup>

Another Kadyrov twisted folk custom is that of collective punishment. Erbsloh highlights this morphing of ancient custom, stating, " In Chechnya, for instance, Kadyrov has revived in badly distorted form the ancient custom of kinship-based liability (*veras*), by which families share responsibility for a crime committed by a family member. What is different now is Kadyrov's insistence on punishing the family, as well as their criminal relative."<sup>162</sup> This distortion of ancient custom is significant because Kadyrov has been actively morphing so called traditions and customs as tasks towards his vision for political, social, and cultural control. Not only does this revival of custom provide a cultural basis to family policing, but reinforces loyalty by Kadyrov's preferable distortion of the custom.

Erbsloh concludes by returning to her original question, on how and why these publications of Dosh and Zhenskoe Slovo might be seen as a threat to the credibility of the Kadyrov regime due to the publications' push for a "Chechnya with its mix of traditional values and civil-society."<sup>163</sup> Dosh is responsible for delivering an alternative narrative to Kadyrov's, laying the ground work for a future civil society when the authoritarian regime implodes.

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<sup>161</sup> Erbslöh, *Seeking Chechen Identity*, 222.

<sup>162</sup> Erbslöh, *Seeking Chechen Identity*, 218.

<sup>163</sup> Erbslöh, *Seeking Chechen Identity*, 212, 223.

Erbsloh underscores that the reemergence of forgotten historical memory, increased dialogue emphasis, and the expansion of a network of intellectuals across various fields continue to support Dosh's mission of delivering independent news to the North Caucasus.

Erbsloh led her article on the basis of traditional media and counter-narrative interviews, but does not include Kadyrov's social media presence in her research. Kadyrov's Instagram account was active during this period and open. Although the scope of her research focused on two publications and interviews, a mention of Kadyrov's prowess on social media would have added another medium to expand on, more precisely to see if a counter-narrative exists in the social media sphere. She does touch on that Dosh has an online platform, but other than this instance, social media is left to the wayside to expand more on the current underground traditional media in the region.

In *The 'Real' Chechen Man: Conceptions of Religion, Nature, and Gender and the Persecution of Sexual Minorities in Postwar Chechnya*, Dominic Scicchitano explores the many factors of the Chechen identity that makes the culture hostile to sexual others as non-traditional and not in line with Ramzan Kadyrov's ideal heteronormative community of Chechnya, leading to LGBTQ persecution in the region.<sup>164</sup> Scicchitano frames the article around Kadyrov's projected masculinity on Instagram and so-called *traditional* Chechen values regarding Islam and warrior culture to show how Chechen adat is incompatible in a globally liberalizing world.

Although Islam forbids senseless killing, the adat demands families with suspected homosexuals to redeem their respect by ridding themselves of the family member with "honor killings."<sup>165</sup> Scicchitano's labeling of Kadyrov's traditional Chechen views hold some agency

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<sup>164</sup> Scicchitano, Dominic. "The 'Real' Chechen Man: Conceptions of Religion, Nature, and Gender and the Persecution of Sexual Minorities in Postwar Chechnya." *Journal of Homosexuality* 0, no. 0 (December 18, 2019): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1701336>

<sup>165</sup> Scicchitano, *The Real Chechen Man*, 3.

although Kadyrov's Chechen ideal is skewed and does not hold the religious traditional aspects explored earlier in Russian literature and Erbslöh's interviews with locals. Kadyrov holds on to the warrior imaginary of generations' past, reconfiguring the warrior into the combat sport-fighter or the soldier in his armed forces. Regardless of the variation of Islam practiced in Chechnya, Kadyrov's is traditional in the context that it is the dominant order in Chechnya and still contains the ancient adat, which Scicchitano shines a light on the aspect of honor killings if someone is found to be homosexual.

Scicchitano uses Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined community"<sup>166</sup> to expand on and parse out three themes: war's heteronormative machismo and feminization in the first Chechen War followed by the changes in the second, natural imagery and animalization linked to Chechen identity and othering, and how contemporary Chechen identity is shaped with the absence of war. Scicchitano expands greatly into Kadyrov's social media use and how he uses it to create "the real Chechen man."<sup>167</sup> In a patriarchal militarized society such as Chechnya, Scicchitano emphasizes that the homosexual man represents a weakness, one that needs to be dealt with by force. This militarization pairs with the animalization of a group of people, likening gays to Chechen jihadists to be considered "sub-human" and were called "bandits" and "werewolves."<sup>168</sup> This animalization of non-traditional sexual others dichotomized them against the ideal Chechenness of heterosexual norms, leading to ever-growing hostilities to gender minority individuals in the population. Building off these two themes, Scicchitano merges them with Ramzan's digital presence in the after war and insurgency years and his formation of the contemporary Chechen identity through his Akhmat-Fight Clubs, denials of Gay men in

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<sup>166</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. New York, NY: Verso, 2006.

<sup>167</sup> Scicchitano, The 'Real' Chechen Man, 6.

<sup>168</sup> Scicchitano, The 'Real' Chechen Man, 8.

Chechnya, and his macho demonstrations on his Instagram such as wrestling dangerous animals or working out with his friends.

In conclusion, Scicchitano reiterates that Chechen identity needs to include the LGBTQ community one day and to stop the persecution if they plan to progress as a society keen on progress in line with Western norms that revolve around human rights, social tolerance, and the development of the region through a free market and not entirely on state funds.<sup>169</sup> In addition, Scicchitano makes sure to dichotomize his ideal of progress and that of Kadyrov's, which includes branding Chechnya as a world of machismo, huge projects such as phallic skyscrapers, and MMA areas to house and entertain those within his ideal world. Although this research was not directly focused on Kadyrov's social media use, it was definitely a factor for evidence and adds a building block to anyone wanting to continue the discussion on Chechen identity online and in social media, and how this culture branding excludes social others in the region.

### **Recent developments in Chechnya and Other Areas for Discussion**

Outside of academic literature, Ramzan Kadyrov has often been depicted consistently on digital outlets for his exaggerated social media use(or misuse), human rights abuses, his notorious presence in MMA culture, security forces, and U.S. sanctions. At the time of this writing, Ramzan Kadyrov and Donald J. Trump are the only people in the world to be kicked off social media platforms indefinitely (Kadyrov had a snide remark when this happened after the January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 U.S. Capitol riots.) After hearing of Trump's blocked social media accounts, on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021 Kadyrov stated on Telegram:<sup>170</sup>

Теперь мы с Трампом в чём-то похожи: если ранее он заблокировал меня в соцсетях, то сейчас Всевышний восстановил справедливость, и в итоге аккаунты

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<sup>169</sup> Scicchitano, *The Real Chechen Man*, 15.

<sup>170</sup> Translation: Now Trump and I are somewhat similar: if earlier he blocked me on social networks, now the Almighty has restored justice, and as a result, the accounts of the rebellious Donald Trump are also blocked. If he would have treated democracy and human rights with respect, nothing like that probably would have happened ...

мятежного Дональда Трампа тоже заблокированы. Вот относился бы он с уважением к демократии и правам человека, ничего такого, наверное, не произошло бы...<sup>171</sup>

Kadyrov's remark garnered attention for the fact that Trump had blocked him twice before, and likened Trump's account restriction as brought on by the Almighty, bring retribution to a social media starved Chechen strongman but at the same time, elevating his position to that of the U.S. President. Ramzan Kadyrov's Telegram would be another area to explore in future research.

Another controversial topic that needs to be looked into further is how Kadyrov's jurisdiction sometimes extends to other North Caucasus neighboring regions and or its people visiting Chechnya. On December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020, North Ossetian Blogger Malika Djikaeva's March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020 arrest was posted on @pro\_chechnya.<sup>172</sup> She was arrested in Grozny on marijuana possession charges while making a visit to the republic with a group of friends. Although she is not Chechen, her presence in the region did not fit into Kadyrov's ideal imaginary of a proper Muslim woman, thus probably compelling him to direct his security forces to stage her arrest.

As a social-media blogger, Malika was known for posting wild videos of herself. Some of these activities involved live streams of shooting guns, fighting other women, kissing a lion cub, swimming in her hijab, wearing tighter than acceptable clothing by local standards, shaving her upper-lip, arm-wrestling, drinking wine, and lighting another woman's dress on fire. Her overall message was to show women that you are free even when you wearing your hijab and or the abaya. Malika often performed exaggerated actions to prove her point. Currently Djikaeva is serving out her 3 year sentence at a work colony, but has be transferred to a pre-trial prison.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> ekhokavkaza.com. "Кадыров о Блокировке Аккаунтов Трампа: Справедливость Восстановлена." Эхо Кавказа, January 8, 2021. <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/31038699.html>.

<sup>172</sup> To see the page, visit: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CI3R0qABFqx/>

<sup>173</sup> Gantimurova, Tatyana. "Advocate Links Blogger Djikaeva's Health Worsening with Her Custody at SIZO." Caucasian Knot, January 31, 2021. <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/53538/>

Figure 2.1



Screenshots from Djikaeva's reel @pro\_chechnya on Instagram December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

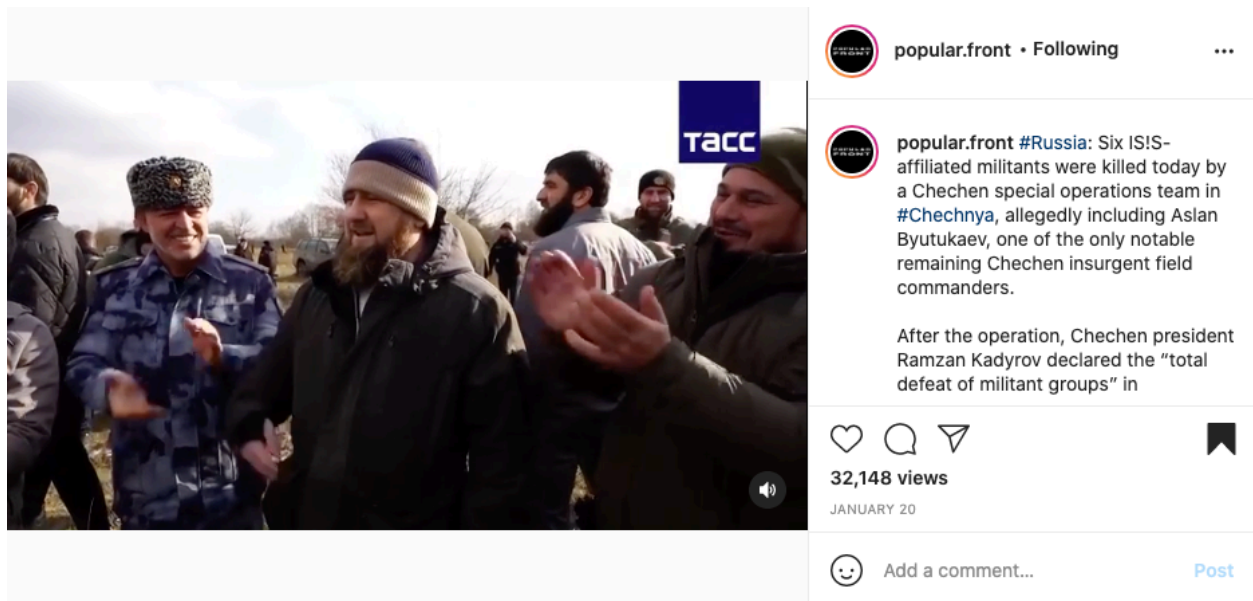
Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CI3R0qABFqx/>

On January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021, along with his entourage, Kadyrov carried out a successful anti-terrorism operation against the supposedly last remaining ISIS-affiliated underground cell in the region affirming that, "All underground bands in Chechnya have now been eliminated."<sup>174</sup> The annihilated combatants also took part in a 2011 Moscow airport bombing that killed 37 people. There are a few videos of the operation in circulation ranging from wild with Ramzan Kadyrov and his main entourage taking part along with the Kadyrovtsy in the operation with automatic machine gun firing and battle cries to relatively tame, such as this TASS news reel. After the operation and a congratulations from President Putin, footage of the operation spread on social media and made it to areas outside the Chechen sphere, such as the Instagram page @Popular.front:

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<sup>174</sup> AP News. "6 Suspected Militants Killed in Russia's Chechnya." AP NEWS, January 20, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/ramzan-kadyrov-chechnya-moscow-islamic-state-group-russia-b9bfc4bc5bfcea9172b486ae3670f08b>.

Figure 2.2



L-R: An MVD Officer, Ramzan Kadyrov, and war time friend and SOBR Terek Commander Abdulazaid Vismuradov, known as "Patriot." January 20<sup>th</sup> 2021. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKRtDMUnuBJ/>

Of course, at the end of the news reel, Kadyrov wraps it with a gregarious "Allahu-Akbar, Akhmat-Sila," letting the world know that the higher powers of God and his Father led to a successful strike. The comment section is a clown show of praise, criticism, and inquiry to many, but nevertheless this is a non-Chechen account and has a wider fan base outside of Kadyrov supports and admirers of strongmen.

### Chapter 3: Nation Branding Theoretical Framework

I will delve into my research on Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov's slogan Akhmat-Sila with the theoretical framework of nation branding. Many attributes of Kadyrov's online and offline activities coincide with other nationalistic strongmen worldwide. These strongmen include former U.S. President Donald J. Trump, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi using similar methods for their versions of national identity formation and narrative construction. Within these constructions, there are semiotic and semantic devices that signal to certain communities within their respective nations.<sup>175</sup> In *Research Companion to Language and Country Branding*, Johanna Tovar states that if these devices are "Used effectively, it is believed to help a country gain a competitive advantage. Used ineffectively, it is believed that it can damage a country's image and identity..<sup>176</sup> However, there is one main difference that separates Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov from these world leaders.

That difference is that Kadyrov controls a Chechen nation under the parameters of Russian control. Russian President Vladimir Putin dictates the parameters of Kadyrov's agency and influence, but does not control him. Kadyrov controls the ethno-national space afforded him. Due to this outlier in power dynamics, his branding will often be placed within a grander Pro-Russian narrative. Kadyrov's exceptionalism in his control of Chechnya does not go unnoticed. Caucasus expert at the Official Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology Sergei Arutyunov states:

What goes on there is impossible in the rest of Russia. It's extraordinary that Kadyrov is able to be absolutely independent in his decision making, while he is simultaneously

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<sup>175</sup> Tovar, Johanna. *Research Companion to Language and Country Branding*. Routledge, 2020. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429325250>

<sup>176</sup> Tovar, Research Companion to Language and Country Branding, 2



completely dependent on the Kremlin for his funding. Chechnya survives thanks to vast subsidies from Moscow, yet Russian authority scarcely exists there.<sup>177</sup>

Nevertheless, this does not hamper Kadyrov's similarities with these world leaders. The key aspect for Kadyrov is that the context of the region controlled is smaller, which gives Chechnya a unique position. Rather than solely nation branding, Chechnya could be considered a mixture of nation, local, and social media branding dependent on re-circulation and preferable performances. These branding aspects thus influences how Chechnya is perceived in the digital and physical international sphere.

Nation Branding theory fits best to describe Kadyrov's slogan. Nation Branding according to Andrew Graan is a relatively recent construct, noting that, "...as a professional service and political project, is a historically recent phenomenon."<sup>178</sup> Homi Bhabha believes the notion as a "repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative."<sup>179</sup> Stephen Hutchings explicates the concept as "the boundaries and values of nations, national cultures and national identities, are within this framework, neither reified nor stable but rather porous, ever-shifting, pluri-accentual and multi-directional."<sup>180</sup> These statements coincide with earlier scholars who agree that the concept is "the imperative to cultivate a consistent representation of the brand image," leading to these recognizable patterns.<sup>181</sup> In this sense, these representations contain a value that "makes

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<sup>177</sup> Nickels, James. "Editorial: Akhmadala & Kadyrov the (Oxy)Moron." *Russian Football News* (blog), September 16, 2018. <https://russianfootballnews.com/editorial-akhmadala-kadyrov-the-oxymoron/>.

<sup>178</sup> Graan, Andrew. "The Nation Brand Regime: Nation Branding and the Semiotic Regimentation of Public Communication in Contemporary Macedonia." *Signs and Society* 4, no. S1 (January 1, 2016): S70–105. <https://doi.org/10.1086/684613>.

<sup>179</sup> Hutchings, Stephen. "Full Article: A Home from Home: Recursive Nationhood, the 2015 STS Television Serial, Londonrad, and Post-Soviet Stiob," June 1, 2017. 142. <https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/doi/full/10.1080/19409419.2017.1323182>.

<sup>180</sup> Hutchings, Recursive Nationhood, 142-143.

<sup>181</sup> Graan, The Nation Brand Regime, 74.

them known to a social domain of persons through its dissemination,” with many other embedded cultural, social, and historical factors tied to it to assist in proliferation.<sup>182</sup>

The main aspect these scholars emphasize for nation branding is the proliferation of a repetitive, recirculating performance. This performance could be a certain action, such as a chant, ritual, reprinting or reimagining, etc. These ideas on nation-branding will be utilized to help explain the proliferation of performative recirculation of Ramzan Kadyrov’s slogan, Akhmat-Sila.

To define nation branding, I will break down the term into its two separate parts, that of what constitutes a nation and then the brand. Nation will be analogous with country in the context of Chechnya’s unique autonomous status, thus defining a country as an area that “consists of populations ranging from tens of thousands to a billion-plus who live in a designated territory.”<sup>183</sup> Buiter likens nation branding as a “single purposefully acting agent.”<sup>184</sup> Ramzan Kadyrov’s Chechnya has defined borders that are legitimized by the Russian Federation and has a long time population that share a common ethnicity, local language, customs, and culture that ultimately differentiate the Chechen people from others within the federation. These attributes give Chechnya the definition as a nation, even though the region is not a sovereign state and is reliant on Russia for its encompassing governing framework. Akhmat-Sila attempts to encapsulate this positionality within Russia while promoting the region’s particularities as a nation within a nation.

In *Research Companion to Language and Country Branding*, Johanna Tovar defines branding as “a process of identity construction, whereby entities in general and countries in

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<sup>182</sup> Agha, Asif. “Tropes of Branding in Forms of Life.” *Signs and Society* 3, no. S1 (January 1, 2015): S175. <https://doi.org/10.1086/679004>.

<sup>183</sup> Tovar, Johanna. *Research Companion to Language and Country Branding*. Routledge, 2020. 7. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429325250>

<sup>184</sup> Buiter, W. H. (2007). ‘Country ownership’: a term whose time has gone. *Development in Practice*, 648. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520701469856>

particular gain visibility and distinctively put themselves on the world map by drawing on their history, culture, economy, society, natural beauty, and, last but not least, their people.”<sup>185</sup> In *Brand, Citationality, Performativity*, Constantine Nakassis considers the brand as “performative” and “citational.”<sup>186</sup> Using branding in the identity formation context, we can say that Ramzan Kadyrov actively molds Chechen identity how he feels will show Chechnya and its people for their time tested positive qualities; warrior-culture, adherence to Islam, a deep sense of ancient ties, and loyalty(politically). Kadyrov also needed a way for this reimagined Chechen identity to be performed easily and to circulate quickly. The slogan Akhmat-Sila performs this function for Kadyrov and its recursive use creates a consistent index to his model of governance, regime sponsored Chechen identity, and memory formation.

Consequently, Ramzan Kadyrov’s distortion of these Chechen values could be considered a mix between traditional and non-traditional modifications. Kadyrov often uses tradition to give agency to new practices, but often are modified to his personal thought on the practice. Thus this shuttling between traditional and non-traditional often creates contrasts or contradictions, often between competing views on customs. Tovar brings this national identity crisis to light, noting that often “... many countries struggle to brand their identities, oscillating between their past, which is usually associated with authenticity and nostalgia, and their present and future, which are often seen as markers of progression and modernization.”<sup>187</sup> Kadyrov forgoes full adherence to these values in the Chechen-historical sense, but uses his own

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<sup>185</sup> Tovar, *Research Companion to Language and Country Branding*, 2.

<sup>186</sup> Nakassis, Constantine V. “Brand, Citationality, Performativity.” *American Anthropologist* 114, no. 4 (2012): 624–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2012.01511.x>.

<sup>187</sup> Tovar, Johanna. *Research Companion to Language and Country Branding*. Routledge, 2020. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429325250>

personality in tandem with distorted traditional customs to dictate how these values should be performed and its circulation to promote his regime.

Like many other countries, including the United States, Kadyrov created a martyr for the region that ultimately became a “super sign,” or as Italian Philosopher Umberto Eco puts it, “a potent icon that can circulate poly-contextually,” his late father Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov.<sup>188</sup> I will state that the super sign of Akhmat-Hadji circulates in all areas of Chechen society, to the point where he is sanctified, such as Lenin, Stalin, and other prominent figures in history. This super signature of Akhmat-Hadji’s likeness is not only depicted in a physical form, but poly-circulated digitally as a slogan, Akhmat-Sila.

### **Ethics of Digital Ethnography**

Throughout the last decade, many people joined social media not only to stay connected with friends or to organize, but to propel their lives. Worldwide, people are online more than ever; logging on to attend zoom meetings, lectures, job fairs, work, tele-work, dating, internet-stalking, surfing the newsfeed, and brand marketing. With an increased presence online comes expanded discussions on digital ethics. Previously, many scholars have thought “...digital fieldwork is not always practical and ultimately depends on one’s research questions, circumstances, and interlocutors.”<sup>189</sup> In retrospect, these scholars are correct that all these factors decide the pragmatics of digital field sites. Now, due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021, researchers have never had a more opportune time to dig into digital ethnography 100 percent remotely.

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<sup>188</sup> Tovar, *Research Companion to Language and Country Branding*, 60.

<sup>189</sup> Pink, Sarah, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi. “Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice,” March 24, 2021. <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/digital-ethnography/book243111>.

In my thesis's context, I will utilize only public facing accounts that can be viewed by anyone who is on Instagram and posts that can be found publicly on the timeline. Utilizing only public facing accounts means that the profiles used chose not to use privacy settings to restrict their content. In light of the current world condition and the greater inability to travel, digital fieldwork brings the concern of ethics in a non-physical world that could have real world implications. There have been discussions of digital ethics in regards to methods, techniques, and collaborative ethnography. Below I will explain further on the digital ethics discussion.

Danah Boyd proceeds with caution on digital data collection, noting that online "... what is private space and personal expression," is key for effective ethical navigation, but opaque at best.<sup>190</sup> Kozinets shines light on the murkiness of the ethical transferability, noting "...there are few, if any, ethical procedures for in-person fieldwork that translate easily to the online medium."<sup>191</sup> Kozinets' realization shows that although mankind created the digital realm, most researchers are not fully sure what is transferable from previous ethical norms. Linda Seligmann and Brian Estes both acknowledge that standard ethical paradigms used before do not fully translate to the digital, noting that "Ethical decisions such as disclosure of information and harm to persons become ever more complex as well."<sup>192</sup> Today, this complexity is simplified. Public information is disseminated to a public(Social media users) and often tagged willfully to demonstrate to an audience or be grouped with similarly tagged photos. This circulative attribute means anyone with an account for the specific social media platform can view, use, and re-share the content.

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<sup>190</sup> Boyd, Danah. *It's Complicated : The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. <http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=698181&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>191</sup> Kozinets, Robert. *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. 2nd ed. SAGE, 2010. 5.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267922181\\_Netnography\\_Doing\\_Ethnographic\\_Research\\_Online/stats](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267922181_Netnography_Doing_Ethnographic_Research_Online/stats).

<sup>192</sup> Seligmann, Linda J., and Brian P. Estes. "Innovations in Ethnographic Methods." *American Behavioral Scientist* 64, no. 2 (February 1, 2020): 176–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219859640>.

Continuing to emphasize the modifications needed for each specific project, Seligmann and Estes state that techniques and methods “...must be tailored to each study, but might include online participant observation; messaging over social media; collecting images, video, and text generated or shared by interlocutors; capturing screenshots and chat logs; or the more controversial act of “lurking” (passive observation).”<sup>193</sup> With various methods that can be simultaneously used, choosing the proper collection methods could maximize research and develop practices of ethical data collection for future projects to use as a roadmap. My research focuses on content collection shared by account holders which is visual and textual in nature.

James Gibson’s theory of affordances will be used to justify the ethics of what is afforded by digital ethnographic methods and the limitations of such research.<sup>194</sup> Measures to safeguard content and personal identifiable information will be implemented. Affordances can be used to navigate ethics in a digital environment. Gibson states that the environment is changed to create man’s affordances, “Why has man changed the shapes and substances of his environment? To change what it affords him.”<sup>195</sup> The collection of available content that is afforded to the researcher publicly without crossing into the private sphere is the main goal.

Applying this idea to Instagram data can help frame the concept in this thesis. Another researcher Jessica Lester uses the affordance theory to justify her digital ethnographic work, “Through this screen, they may be afforded access to particular communities’ actions—synchronously and/or asynchronously.”<sup>196</sup> These affordances are imperative for digital fieldwork

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<sup>193</sup> Seligmann and Estes, *Innovations in Ethnographic Methods*, 180.

<sup>194</sup> Donald Norman expands Gibson’s theory in a contemporary setting, the computer interface and its affordances, cultural conventions, and limitations. See more at: “Affordance, Conventions, and Design.” *Interactions* 6 (May 1, 1999): 39. <https://doi.org/10.1145/301153.301168>

<sup>195</sup> Gibson, James. “*The Theory of Affordances*”. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979. 3. [https://monoskop.org/images/c/c6/Gibson\\_James\\_J\\_1977\\_1979\\_The\\_Theory\\_of\\_Affordances.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/c/c6/Gibson_James_J_1977_1979_The_Theory_of_Affordances.pdf).

<sup>196</sup> Lester, Jessica Nina. “Going Digital in Ethnography: Navigating the Ethical Tensions and Productive Possibilities.” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 20, no. 5 (October 1, 2020): 416. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708620936995>.

because it allows the researcher to enter a field site to a community, possibly thousands of miles away, and a way to refer back to the data in case of data loss. Another benefit of asynchronous collection is that you do not need a (re)authorization to regain the data. Experiencing these communities' actions in a digital public mitigates ethical concerns of what is accessible or not. Due to the limitations of screenshots, accidentally captured account information not associated within the scope of research will be anonymized by photo editing, sanitizing account names, and or facial blurring.

The way Chechen officials, institutions, and residents use Instagram offer an unique view of how social media platforms are used within regional and diasporic contexts. One critical view of Ramzan Kadyrov's use is from Tanya Lokshina, stating, "His obsession with social media is simple: He likes it, but it also gives him a place to control the news coming from Chechnya for the Kremlin, and show people that he's the boss."<sup>197</sup> The cultural constraints are typical of Muslim dominant regions, but have aspects unique to Chechnya, such as Kadyrov's control over the platform(s) within the ethnic population. There is also an observation that the security officials (Kadyrovtsy) check young peoples' phones periodically for undesirable content. Sometimes, preferable images are included to bypass gatekeepers. In *No Friends But The Mountains*, Judith Matloff reveals this practice when an interviewee's phone lit up showing a picture of Kadyrov, with the local journalist defending her action, "I don't like him" and "It helps me with access to authorities."<sup>198</sup> This intrusion of privacy may also lead people who may not normally support Kadyrov to have supportive content on their phones in the case of a random check.

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<sup>197</sup> Grove, Thomas. "The Strongman of Instagram." *Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2016, sec. 1. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-strongman-of-instagram-1472221224>.

<sup>198</sup> Matloff, Judith. *No Friends But The Mountains Dispatches from the World's Violent Highlands*. New York: Basic Books, 2017. 131.

Some additional cultural constraints that can be observed is the modest dress of women, no pictures with the opposite sex unless they are family, men working out with their friends, and social interactions involving big groups of men while women are in smaller groups. Other aspects are pseudonyms instead of names, Islamic themed posts, and veneration of Chechen heroes, combat-sport fighters, and Akhmat-Hadji and Ramzan Kadyrov. All of these observations are from a general surfing of accounts on the platform from the region and will be expanded upon later in chapter 4 of the thesis. Next we will see some methodologies used in digital ethnographic studies.

### **Digital Ethnographic Methodologies**

A decade and a half ago in 2005, virtual researcher Christine Hine showed her unease for the new digital frontier, stating that, “Methodological solutions gain much of their authority through precedent, and it is not clear as yet just how far the heritage of research methodology applies to new media and what gaps in our understanding are still to be exposed.”<sup>199</sup> Hine’s unease was justifiable, the virtual world of communications was novel, with millions of variables still unknown. Could traditional theories be applied in the digital world? What kind of modifications need to be made? How credible could online research be? What new issues will arise? These questions that arose to navigate the web were needed to help “understand this changing, increasingly digitized society.”<sup>200</sup>

Now, 15 years since *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, the international digital landscape has fundamentally changed. Now, Hine acknowledges and understands that this new realm of digital society is “embedded, embodied, and

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<sup>199</sup> Hine, Christine. *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Oxford, UK ; Berg, 2005. 1.

<sup>200</sup> Kozinets, Robert. *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. 2nd ed. SAGE, 2010.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267922181\\_Netnography\\_Doing\\_Ethnographic\\_Research\\_Online/stats](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267922181_Netnography_Doing_Ethnographic_Research_Online/stats).



everyday[sic].”<sup>201</sup> Andreas Bernard links Hine’s thought with his own theory, that the intertextual nature of the hashtag sits between, “text and metatext, and it draws the previously hidden steps of cataloging and indexing out into the open.”<sup>202</sup> The relevance of embedded intertextual activity is present in both authors’ comments, but expressed differently. These expressions can both serve to explain Chechen digital society and the circulation of Akhmat-Sila on Instagram through hashtags, post text, and profile signs related to the slogan that can be indexical of certain Chechen groups. Although much of the digital landscape has evolved immensely, at the beginning of the 2010s, social media platforms were still in their infancy and their parent companies had just discovered a way to have personal cellular device access. In some countries, you still had to log-on to your account (Facebook, Myspace, or Instagram at the time) from a personal desktop, laptop, or make a trip to the internet café. However, with the proliferation of the smart phone worldwide, device prices dropped and mobile social media use escalated and social networks broadened in “emerging economies.”<sup>203</sup>

In 2007, Danah Boyd raised the question of social media with her research on “Online Social Networks” which laid the foundation for works in digital ethnography and as an heuristic for the term social media and the history of it prior to 2007.<sup>204</sup> This paper helped further research in the field. In one of the earliest studies of a *contemporary* social media platform, in *Tales From Facebook*, Daniel Miller constructs a two part book, the first part laying out case studies

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<sup>201</sup>Hine, Christine. “Ethnography for the Internet : Embedded, Embodied and Everyday,” 2015. <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=3a0653a9-df87-49c8-bda7-815122e3e22e%40pdc-v-sessmgr06&vid=0&format=EB>.

<sup>202</sup> Bernard, Andreas. *The Theory of The Hashtag*. Polity Press, 2019. Accessed February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/lib/utxa/detail.action?docID=5847436>.

<sup>203</sup> Silver, Laura, and Christine Huang. “Smartphone, Social Media Users Have Broader Social Networks In Emerging Economies.” *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech* (blog), August 22, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/08/22/in-emerging-economies-smartphone-and-social-media-users-have-broader-social-networks/>.

<sup>204</sup> Boyd, Danah, and Nicole Ellison. “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship.” *J. Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (October 1, 2007): 210–30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x>.

conducted while in Trinidad and the second part emphasizing the anthropology of the social media platform in the Trinidadian context in December 2009 to January 2010. In short, Miller explores and adds the idea of “ethnographically situational awareness” of various sites in the field on and offline.<sup>205</sup>

Miller cautions that although people use Facebook for various reasons, much cannot be seen when users go offline. He uses various case studies to prove his argument, and how social media can be enabling or disabling to the user.<sup>206</sup> In one case study where Miller explains how certain intimate media was exposed on Facebook or what Trinidadians coined as *Fasbook*, Miller revealed a key facet to privacy with Josanne’s sex tape leak, “No one was hurt in making this tape; many people were greatly hurt by its exposure. So, at least for a liberal ethics based on avoidance of harm, the problem is its dissemination, not its production.”<sup>207</sup> So, the content made is not the problem, it is how it circulates. Since Miller wrote this particular work, there has been advancements in terms of technology and the variety of social media platforms available and their capabilities, also to include ways to take down such content. However, for Miller to conduct his research, he still required in-person fieldwork to get a holistic view on the offline culture that influenced the online.

In a 2014 Digital Ethnography *It’s Complicated*, Danah Boyd explores the social media use of high school students at a particular school and the “networked publics” that have seemed to develop around offline-world lines. Boyd fleshes out her argument with 8 aspects of social media: identity, privacy, addiction, danger, bullying, inequality, literacy, and searching for a

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<sup>205</sup> Marcus, George E. “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 111.

<https://login.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=https://www.jstor.org/stable/2155931>

<sup>206</sup> Miller, Daniel. *Tales From Facebook*. Kindle Edition. Polity Press, 2011.

<sup>207</sup> Miller, *Tales From Facebook*, 107.

public of their own. One main theme Boyd points out is that social media is “public by default, private through effort.”<sup>208</sup> This notion of what constitutes a public sphere is important and often needs a definition to give a sort of structure to give an affordance, perceived affordance, or constraints. For research, what constitutes a public sphere is important for Institutional Review Boards and or needing approval for interviews with subjects online if your content reaches into private domains. On the other hand, if this individual posts a comment on a picture or posts a picture, that would be considered public, not private like Instagram’s direct message feature. Depending where you draw the line of consent, it could be when your message is accepted by the receiver or when you formally ask the participant for consent.

In *Visualising Facebook: A Comparative Perspective* Daniel Miller and Jolynna Sinanan conduct a comparative study between Facebook posts between English and Trinidadian mothers in their respective countries and how they respond to similar life events in their own “bubbles.”<sup>209</sup> Much of what Miller and Sinanan do is produce a qualitative answer to a quantitative collection of 20,000 posted images and how they must be interpreted within their respective local contexts and how local customs and “generalized cultural norms” control on what is posted and how it is perceived online.<sup>210</sup> Miller also underscores that in his previous work *Tales of Facebook* that he did “not include one single image,” primarily due to publisher angst and the cost of printing color visuals.<sup>211</sup> Another criticism Miller received on his previous work was merely for the fact that he did his social media study in Trinidad as if the region was

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<sup>208</sup> Boyd, Danah. *It's Complicated : The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. 12. <http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=698181&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>209</sup> Slotta, James. “The Annotated Donald Trump: Signs of Circulation in a Time of Bubbles.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 29, no. 3 (2019): 397–416. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12228>.

<sup>210</sup> Miller, Daniel, and Jolynna Sinanan. *Visualising Facebook: A Comparative Perspective*. London: UCL Press, 2017. 2. Accessed January 27, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1mtz51h>.

<sup>211</sup> Miller and Sinanan, *Visualising Facebook*, 1.

more important than others, when in reality it is just within Miller's area of expertise and thus making Trinidad and ideal area to conduct his research and its uniqueness.

Sinanan is also a prominent digital ethnographer, in which she did her monograph in the same geographical area as Miller, but more specifically for the location of El Mirador, Trinidad while Miller tackled the other half of the comparative study in The Glades in South East England. The study was conducted ethnographically and basically, wading through mass amounts of photos and selfies, "With respect to identifying larger patterns of posting, our main approach was simply to stare at thousands of visual postings and try and identify repetition and genres," which seems to be an effective way to gauge visual culture and identify cultural nuances, indexical signs, and semiotic devices.<sup>212</sup> This method ultimately influences my research for the fact there are millions of photos in circulation. Miller and Sinanan also go for footnotes rather than in-text citation so the reading public that will be included will be broader in scope, rather than just catering to an academic public, but of course includes relevant research data to give backing to the accessible writing style. Nevertheless, Miller and Sinanan both acknowledge the scope of their research and how their findings only contribute to a particular gap among many to be discovered.

### **Scope of Research**

Much of these digital ethnographic methods explained above create a collection of unique monographs that can give a holistic view of social media utilization around the world and the uniqueness of each region's cultural adaptations of a platform, leading to emic themes and trends in the data. In addition, the methodologies above give a framework to explore the realm of visual culture in social media. However, much of the data collected also had a physical in-person

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<sup>212</sup> Miller and Sinanan, *Visualising Facebook*, 5.

component to collect said data, leaving much to the imagination to what and how much can be explored on just a sole digital platform for the exploration of such trends or phenomena in culturally specific social media bubbles. Now, given that much of the research conducted since March 2020 has occurred during the Worldwide Covid-19 Pandemic, the in-person aspect to much digital ethnographic field work has been restricted to the home nation of the researcher due to land border closures, strict entry requirements, or just plain denial of entry to foreigners to the research region.

In the scope of my thesis I only hope to conduct a phenomenological analysis to explore a small ethnic world on Instagram I would like to call “Ramzan’s Instagram Culture and Identity of Chechnya.” In this realm I will explore identity/local/nation/social media branding or a sort of combination of the mentioned types due to many aspects overlapping each other.

Phenomenological analysis seems to fit the proliferation of Akhmat-Sila in visual culture and discourse best because you can include other types of analysis such as narrative, case-study, and of course digital ethnography being the overall method.

This view does not mean you cannot conduct a similar analysis within a different scope but rather my choice. In addition, this research does not pertain to all Chechens who identify with the slogan but rather only gives an insight to an aspect that circulates within the culture itself. Just as in all societies on an offline, some people may demonstrate a particular utterance or practice while others do not. Another aspect of this research is that it will only explore the digital sphere on social media and no in-person research or interactions, similar to the fly on the wall observer approach, given the limitations and other cultural/political factors that make in-person research inconvenient or possibly dangerous.

## **Chapter 4: Research of Ramzan Kadyrov's Slogan Akhmat-Sila**

The research conducted on Ramzan Kadyrov and his model for Chechen identity and the phenomenon of the indexical slogan, Akhmat-Sila, is a collection of screen shots from Chechen-related government/personal accounts, articles, YouTube videos, news, and other forms of media that will span more or a less a 4 year period where the slogan Akhmat-Sila is imagined, used, praised, or criticized. Of course to find many of these screenshots that have value, thousands had to be sifted through. I will not quantify them due to the massive amount of data available, but only note a few trends below to coincide with Akhmat-Sila. The slogan Akhmat-Sila will be seen circulated in digital and physical formats in public spheres orally, visually, and textually.

Sometimes, only the word Akhmat will be present in said forms but falls under as an aspect of the slogan. The evidence will be ordered more or less thematically to group similar sets of data together. Although there are thousands of photos, this is qualitative data meant to sum up the slogan's significance. So, any numerical data will only be added to show growth and not analytical quantitative data. The primary focus will be Instagram and other forms of media will be used to help weave a narrative that can help explain this phenomenon. One affordance of this type of research is that the data is often available asynchronously and does not require real time collection. Some of the research topic's limitations arise from inevitable factors in social media with an authoritarian strongman, the loss of data due to account closures.

### **Akhmat-Sila Origins**

Since Kadyrov's first Instagram, @Kadyrov\_95, was shut down due to the December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2017 U.S. sanctions, prompting Instagram to boot him off the platform, it is difficult to know how far Akhmat-Sila goes back on the Instagram record holistically. Fortunately, some of Kadyrov's main members in his entourage were not hit by sanctions and were able to keep and

share some of Kadyrov's content and their own original demonstrations of the slogan, emerging somewhere around the spring of 2017. Kadyrov's commander of the Kadyrovtsy, Zamid Chelaev has one of the earliest post using the slogan. On March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017 in figure 4.1, Chelaev used the slogan to show praise to the SOBR Terek commander Abuzaid Vismuradov.<sup>213</sup> We can assume that the slogan was not in circulation too far before then. The earliest origins of the slogan in music seems to have emerged with Timati's song "Grozny" in late 2018. As of today, January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the slogan is now hash-tagged 128,975 times on Instagram under #ахматсила alone. However, the slogan is not only restricted to the hashtag. Below will be some occurrences of the slogan before the first sanction, some photos will be curated to avoid redundancy but nevertheless, contained the slogan textually or visually:

Figure 4.1



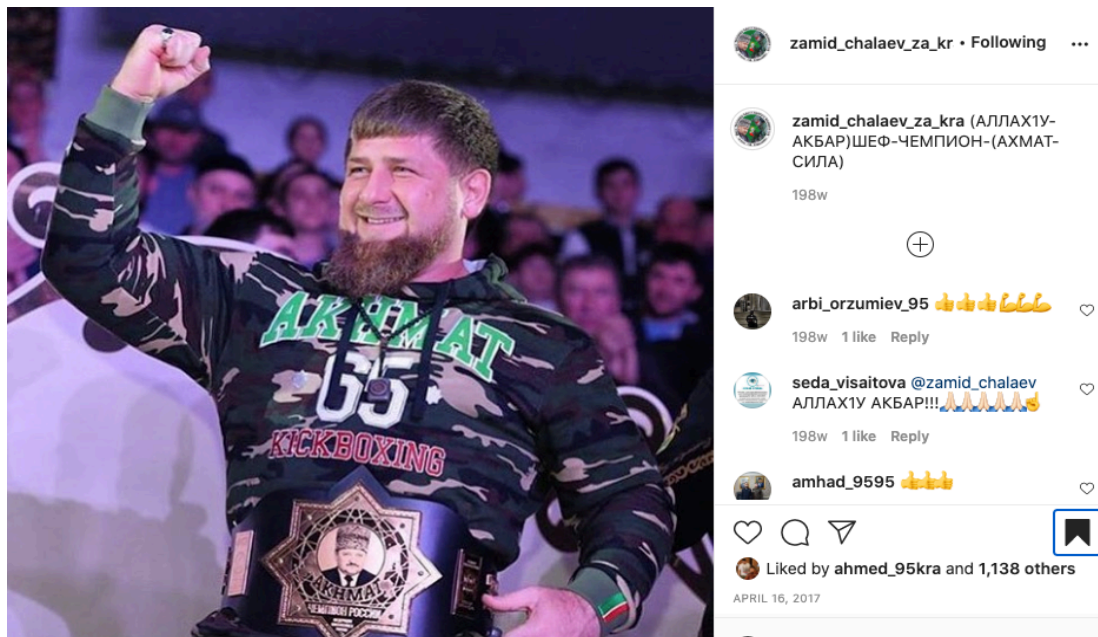
The earliest found textual evidence of Akhmat-Sila before U.S. Sanctions, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRs95BRhnAu/>.

<sup>213</sup> Zamid\_chalaev\_zk\_kr. "Командир((СОБР ТЕРЕК)) ((ПАТРИОТ)) Лучший Соратник Нашего ГЛАВЫ ЧР. Р А КАДЫРОВА." Instagram, March 16, 2017. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRs95BRhnAu/>.

In figure 4.1 you can see in the main post comment that Akhmat-Sila is not yet a hashtag, but is grouped with hashtags such as #чечня, #грозный, and #патриот giving an idea of what the slogan encapsulates. The visual representation to go with the text is Vismuradov in traditional attire. Most notable articles are the Cherkesska tunic with cartridge holders on the chest and a sheep skin papakha, referring back to 19<sup>th</sup> century Chechen male dress.

Figure 4.2



A Unique variation of the slogan, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Akhmat is also presented twice visually.  
Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BS9YAjFBFUt/>

Above in figure 4.2, Zamid Chelaev’s comment adds content connected to the slogan Akhmat-Sila. Not only is the slogan mentioned with a triumphant Kadyrov, but is linked with other words often used in Chechnya to praise God and to signify who is the leader.<sup>214</sup> In the comments section, two out of the three visible comments signal to other regime supporters with the number 95. The middle commenter likens the photo as a praise to God, writing “Allahu-Akbar” along with a prayer hand and pointing up emoji.

<sup>214</sup> Translation: “(God is good)Chief-Champion(Akhmat is Strength).”



Figure 4.3



June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/BVh\\_zTxhuF2/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BVh_zTxhuF2/)

Above in figure 4.3, a visual of what Akhmat-Sila signifies (Ramzan’s Chechnya) and what it does not, the Chechen identity imaginaries of former rebel leader Shamil Basayev and former Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov that led to turmoil with Russia. Referring back to Chapter one, Akhmad-Hadji’s power grab ultimately pushed these former Chechen commanders to the side of the enemies of the Russian state. The screenshot shows how under Ramzan’s pious rule with Russian funding that religion, new infrastructure, and peace is present. The latter part of the figure demonstrates what Maskhadov’s and Basayev’s control brought to Chechnya: war, outside Salafi Islamic practices, and decay.

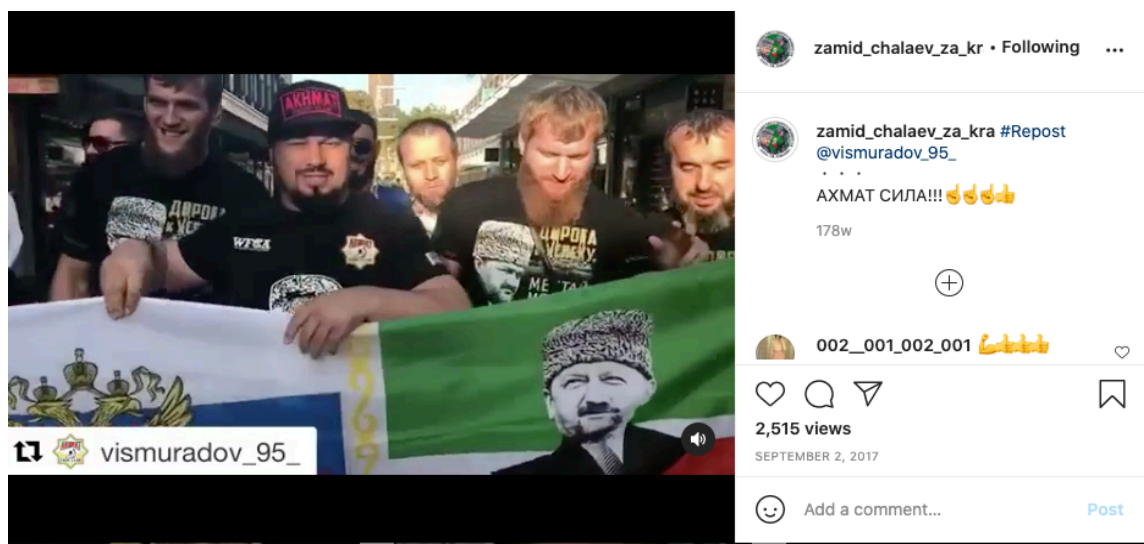
Figure 4.4



Translation: “The whole Benoy and Benovites are for Ramzan, and who is against this is our common enemy. *Who does not understand then will understand.*” Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BXLm-2zhqUE/>

Above, Figure 4.4 demonstrates how Akhmat-Sila is tied to Kadyrov's teip, the Benoy. By far the largest and most powerful teip in the region, Kadyrov makes sure to demonstrate a successful pose for his blood relatives. The Kadyrovtsy commander Zamid Chelaev also shares the photo, showing its recirculation. Kadyrov's branded apparel is stamped with his father's name on the sweater and on the championship fight belt. Two out of the three commenters also have signs indexical to Kadyrov's rule. The first commenter has the license plate code 95 in his Instagram name, which signifies Chechnya, and the second account demonstrates similar support with "za kra" and 95 included.

Figure 4.5



Vismuradov with MMA Akhmat fight club fighters, holding a Russian flag joined with a Chechen flag with Akhmat-Hadji's likeness on it, demonstration how one cannot be without the other. September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BYiKPYZBn-N/>

Another show of recirculation, figure 4.5 shows that Abuzaid Vismuradov first circulated this video of a group of boxers chanting Akhmat-Sila while also holding a banner of two conjoined flags. The post was then shared again by the Kadyrovtsy commander. The Chechen flag with Akhmat-Hadji's image and the Russian flag with the double-headed eagle imprinted on it highlights the partnership that Russia and Chechnya now hold today due to Akhmad-Hadji's decision he made in 1999. Nearly every participant in this march has a shirt with Akhmad-





be assured also that Edilov's fighting career is not finished, but only in a low period where he can train and better himself to better represent his patron and all that encompasses Akhmat-Sila for greater glory.

In figure 4.6 Edilov's importance as a Chechen prize fighter is evident, with the Kadyrovtsy commander posting a photo montage of the fighter's greatness for Akhmat-Fight Clubs. Edilov is the embodiment of Akhmat-Sila by performing the modern Chechen warrior ideal as a competitive fighter. The comments section also shows supporters giving praise with the signs 95 and "za kra" in their account names again. This repetitiveness starts to develop a pattern in Chechnya where Akhmat-Sila, Za Kra, and 95 are all associated with each other. Even in the likes count you can see the most recent like was from a account holder with these two signs included in the name.

Figure 4.7



Translation: "Many ask the question, what signifies the expression Akhmat Sila? But often they understand this expression incorrectly. Akhmat-Sila, this is not only a phenomenon of strength, this expression represents the work of the team of the first presidential hero of Russia Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov(Chechen)."

In figure 4.7, we finally find a definition of what Akhmat-Sila means to the local soccer team and more broadly of what the definition consists of. We can notice that the definition references to Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov's work and all that came after his 2004 death, to explain the renaming of the soccer team from FC Terek to FC Akhmat. Chelaev also adds an explanation to mitigate the ideas others may have had of the slogan's meaning or what it consists of. However, this definition only describes the overall significance of Akhmat-Sila with the slogan's face, the likeness Akhmad-Haji and his past works. The slogan in this instance performs as a visual memorial to a Chechen Martyr. The team aspect of the definition could be referred to the soccer team, or it can refer to the Akhmad-Hadji's former entourage who sided with him and are in power now with his son, Ramzan. Akhmad-Hadji is also referred to as "Hero of Russia," which is the highest honor in Russia for service to the nation and its people.<sup>217</sup> A main difference here is that Akhmad-Hadji is labeled this with first president preceding it, referring to Putin. Thus, the slogan here includes recent history and is an evolving term as its popularity, usage, and regional spread increases.

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<sup>217</sup> To see details, visit: [https://web.archive.org/web/20120220161643/http://award.adm.gov.ru/geroi/geroi\\_1.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20120220161643/http://award.adm.gov.ru/geroi/geroi_1.htm)

## Fight Celebrities and The Slogan

Figure 4.8



November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BcLHor4BOrh/>

Many people may wonder of Kadyrov's fascination with some of the biggest names in combat-sports history. Well, these associations are all a part to give his regime and fight clubs credibility. Figure 4.8 depicts 3 screenshots, focusing on the visual rather than textual evidence in the comment box. The first photo shows Mike Tyson chanting "Akhmat-Sila" with his sponsor in Chechnya, thus demonstrating that even fight legends are using the slogan. Pointing the figure upward also demonstrates that the slogan refers to God, showing the slogan's connection to religion. The bottom photo also shows a video screenshot of Tyson with Kadyrov in his palace, demonstrating the Chechen leader's closeness to the highest echelons of the fight world by touching Tyson while wearing a sports jacket with Akhmat-Sila stitched on the front. In the video, Kadyrov play fights with Tyson as a greeting followed with a hug, showing the

custom of hospitality. Towards the end of the visit the video shows Tyson signing Kadyrov's sweater as a signature of approval.

Floyd Mayweather, the world's highest paid combat-sport fighter and all time boxing legend is also given a royal entrance by Kadyrov into Chechnya. On December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Chechens waited outside in the snow for hours at Grozny airport, chanting Akhmat-Sila before Mayweather arrived and while he disembarked the plane.<sup>218</sup> Not only is Kadyrov also wearing Akhmat-Sila branded apparel, but gave Mayweather a hat with the Akhmat-Fight Club symbol on it. Kadyrov is associating his brand with the biggest names in the fighting world and simultaneously giving them his brand merchandise. Mayweather also attended some events in Kadyrov's fight leagues, giving his leagues a sense of legitimacy.<sup>219</sup> Mayweather was so smitten with Kadyrov, that Mayweather declared "If I got Russian citizenship, I would have a place in Moscow and I would have a house in Chechnya...both!"<sup>220</sup> This declaration from Mayweather gives Kadyrov's followers a boost, knowing that a World champion would want to live among them, the land of fighters. Their meeting concludes by chanting Akhmat-Sila all together while Kadyrov walks Mayweather out. The cult of the warrior is strong in Chechnya, and it is only amplified by these high profile visits, warp-speed developments in Kadyrov's personal fight club enterprises, and the elevation of ambitious young Chechens to the highest levels possible. Akhmat-Sila represents this warrior paradigm.

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<sup>218</sup> ЧГТРК "Грозный." Рамзан Кадыров Встретился с Флойдом Мейвезером в Грозном / Floyd Mayweather in Russia, 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeXi\\_veTqIQ&t=9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeXi_veTqIQ&t=9s).

<sup>219</sup> Mountain MMA. Floyd Mayweather's Crazy Visit To Russia 🇷🇺, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuVrVB7JzcE>.

<sup>220</sup> ЧГТРК "Грозный." Рамзан Кадыров Встретился с Флойдом Мейвезером в Грозном / Floyd Mayweather in Russia, 2017. 1:50-2:00. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeXi\\_veTqIQ&t=9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeXi_veTqIQ&t=9s).

## Ramzan Kadyrov and Instagram after 2017 Sanctions

### Entourage Accounts

After the first line of U.S. imposed sanctions in late December 2017 to the last set of imposed sanctions in 2020, Ramzan Kadyrov seemed to have a few doppelganger accounts, many of which relayed or posted his content from Telegram. Although Telegram stores a wealth of information on Kadyrov's current personal free range account usage, it is not within the scope of this current research and is an area that will need to be expanded upon in the future. Another social media area to explore would be Kadyrov's Chechen developed Mylistory, a Chechen version of Instagram, Ran by the Chechen government and rumored to be used as a propaganda outlet.<sup>221</sup> However, the security of Mylistory is questionable and possibly needs a brave soul and a burner phone.<sup>222</sup> His entourage would need to be included too. The last Kadyrov account to be hit by the May 2020 U.S. Sanctions was @Kadyrov.\_95. Kadyrov's right hand men were also blocked to include his cousin Adam Delimkhanov, Magomed Daudov(Lord), and Abuzaid Vismuradov(Patriot).<sup>223</sup> The blocked pages that can be found are below:

Figure 4. 9



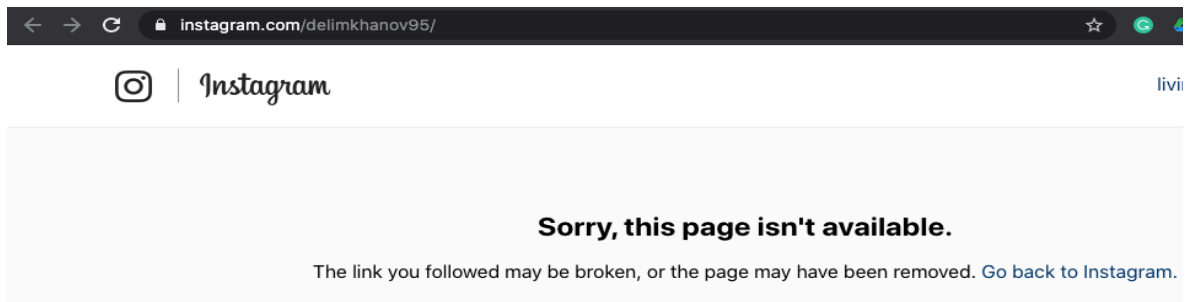
<sup>221</sup> Tlis, Fatima. "The 'Chechen' Clone of Instagram: Part II." POLYGRAPH.info, January 18, 2018. <https://www.polygraph.info/a/chechnya-kadyrov-social-media-surveillance-/28983182.html>.

<sup>222</sup> Кавказ.Реалии. "Насколько опасно приложение Mylistory?" RFE/RL, January 15, 2018. <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/naskolko-opasno-prilozhenie-mylistory/28976087.html>.

<sup>223</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. "'Content Unavailable': Facebook Again Blocks Kadyrov's Instagram Account." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, May 14, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/content-unavailable-facebook-again-blocks-kadyrov-s-instagram-account/30611740.html>.



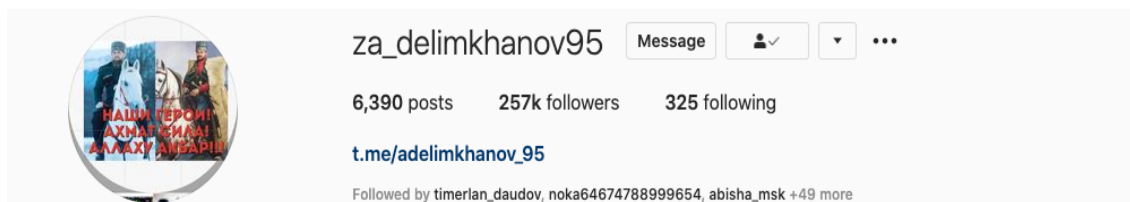
Figure 4.10



Adam Delimkhanov's account afterward. May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Source: [www.instagram.com/delimkhanov95/](http://www.instagram.com/delimkhanov95/)

The “page not available links” in figure 4.9 and 4.10 are also present for Magomed Daudov(Lord) and Abuzaid Vismuradov(Patriot). I have found their new active accounts but they will remain only as long as they are not discovered by U.S. sanction officers. There is also the possibility that they were able to change some parts of their account names before sanctions hit, thus preserving their accounts. According to the amount of followers for the following accounts, a sizable portion of the population follows them:

Figure 4.11



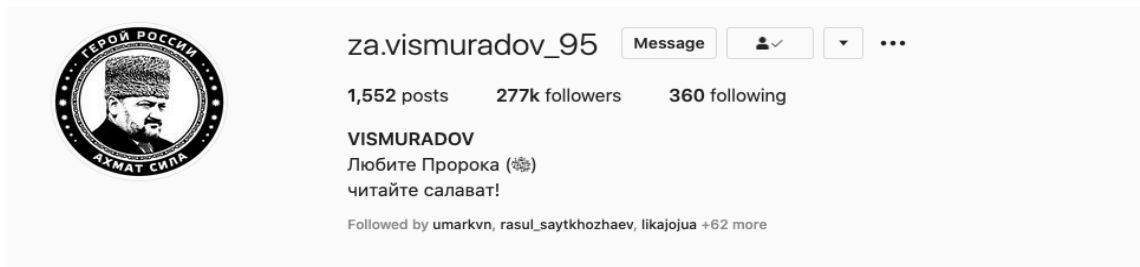
The new account of Parliamentary Adam Delimkhanov. As per proper procedure, there is a picture of Ramzan Kadyrov and his father, Akhmat-Hadji. His Telegram link is included. Maybe the U.S. Treasury missed his real account? February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. Source: [https://www.instagram.com/za\\_delimkhanov95/](https://www.instagram.com/za_delimkhanov95/)

Figure 4.12



The account of Chechen Parliamentary Magomed Daudov. The amount of shared followed accounts, amount of followers, and the blue verification sign lead to legitimacy. The first post is also from early 2019. February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. Source: [https://www.instagram.com/lord\\_095/](https://www.instagram.com/lord_095/)

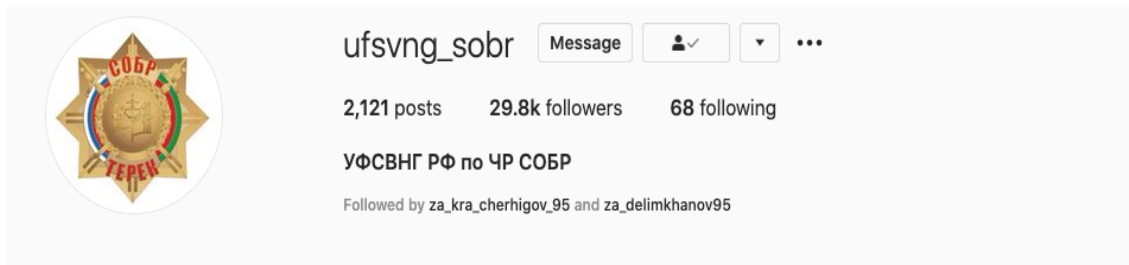
Figure 4.13



Vismuradov's page. The super signage of Akhmat-Hadji, slogan signaling, and Islamic saying are common in Chechen government profiles. Another aspect mentioned earlier in Chapter 4 that is entirely Russian, the hero of Russia honorary title is placed above Akhmad-Hadji. February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. Source:

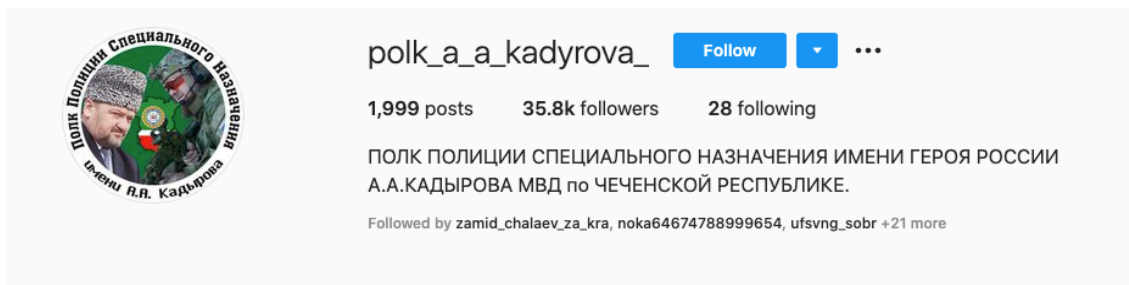
[www.instagram.com/za.vismuradov\\_95/](https://www.instagram.com/za.vismuradov_95/)

Figure 4.14



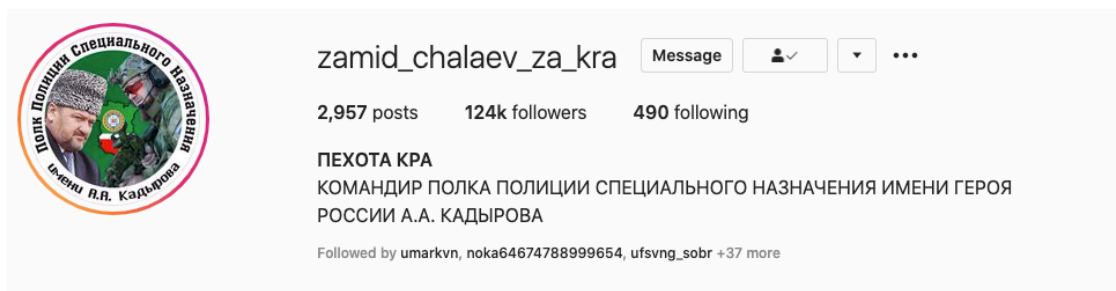
The SOBR Terek Chechen Special Forces page. Source: [www.instagram.com/ufsvng\\_sobr/](https://www.instagram.com/ufsvng_sobr/)

Figure 4.15



The Kadyrovtsy page. February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. Source: [www.instagram.com/\\_a\\_a\\_kadyrova/](https://www.instagram.com/_a_a_kadyrova/)

Figure 4.16



The Kadyrovtsy Commander Page. He has had the most extensive Instagram history ranging all the way back to 2013. This account has remained untouched. February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. Source:

[www.instagram.com/zamid\\_chalaev\\_zakra](https://www.instagram.com/zamid_chalaev_zakra)

In figures 4.11 through 4.16 from just looking at the headings on the pages of Ramzan's entourage and supporting forces, the average person can identify a few themes. The main theme seen in almost all of them is the image of the late Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov. Excluding SOBR Terek, the elder Kadyrov's image takes the place of the default photo, sometimes paired with his son, Ramzan. On Delimkhanov's default photo, Ramzan and Akhmat-Hadji are depicted in classic Chechen attire on horses, with the elder Kadyrov's likeness painted in the historic imaginary of the Caucasian heroes of centuries past, such as Imam Shamil.

### **Semantic and Semiotic Devices**

Other forms of signs indexical of Chechen identity can be paired or similar in significance to Akhmat-Sila. One such sign is the Za KRA, which can often be seen on many Chechen Instagram accounts, but is more prevalent for government functionaries. This pairing means "For Kadyrov Ramzan Akhmatovich," which ultimately shows support for the current leadership and their status with Kadyrov or any of his extensions of power within the greater Russian Federation. This signification also acts as a sort of diplomatic immunity out of the region, with the FSB reluctant to pursue any suspected license plates with those specific letters, often attached with Chechnya's regional tag number, 95. Pairing this information with what is found in this FP article, "KRA-marked Porches and Lexuses" often drive around with impunity from the local traffic enforcement in Chechnya and more of these tagged luxury cars have been found running around Moscow.<sup>224</sup> So, not only does Akhmat-Sila project strength, but also a social status that is above Russian federal law.

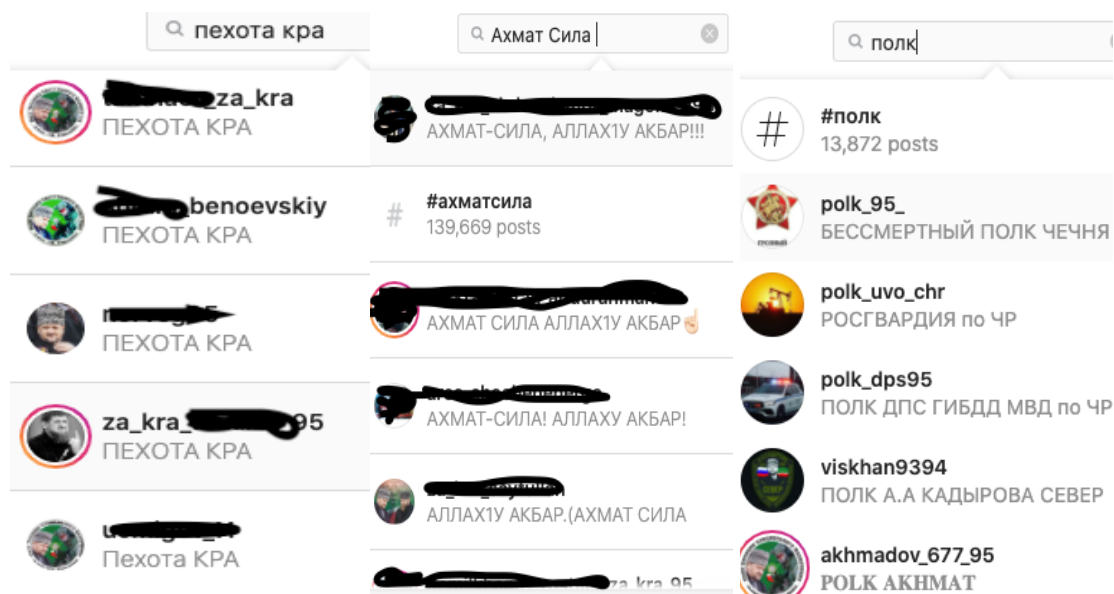
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<sup>224</sup> Nemtsova, Anna. "The Chechen Boss." *Foreign Policy* (blog), April 1, 2013. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/01/the-chechen-boss/>.

Another significant aspect of figure 4.17 below are the words “polk” and “pekhota.” In Russian, these words mean “regiment” and “foot soldier” respectively, referring to the Kadyrovtsy and their members. The members, of course found a way to identify each other, having these specific keywords attached to their Instagram accounts. You can easily identify who are members of the special police force or any other local group really by simply typing “a.a.kadyrova, polk kadyrova, or “пехота кра” and more than a handful of accounts will come up.

The linkage does not stop there, once Ахмат Сила is put in the search query you can see that there are various forms of the same keyword, sometimes crisscrossing at the bottom of figure 4.17 with a “za\_kra\_95” coming up at the middle-bottom of first 5 profiles to pop up. There are more similar profiles that appear once you scroll down to include some that are not relevant to the discussion. However, the limitations of the screen shot are apparent and would require multiple screen shots of a redundancy that can be displayed with a sample, keeping the same significance:

Figure 4.17



February 4<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. Source: [www.instagram.com](http://www.instagram.com)

In addition, the “KRA factor” has a broader significance.<sup>225</sup> Tanya Lokot mentions in her blog that Novaya Gazeta Reporter Yelena Milashina not only recognizes KRA as a signifier, but also as a systematic way to control the Chechen internet/social media space. Milashina goes into detail how the KRA factor came to be. Milashina includes some screenshots of Kadyrov’s and Magomed Daudov’s original Instagram bullying tactics used to intimidate critics in and outside the region to retract what they said or be silenced. The Chechen government had a website dedicated to outlining the factors that make up KRA’s significance at [www.factorkra.ru](http://www.factorkra.ru), but has been shut down. Due to this page shutdown, I cannot tell you what I saw on the page of the factors that constituted the KRA method.

Fortunately, Lokot’s repost her blog of Milashina’s 2016 article providing a copy of the information, because the original article is now *missing* in the hyperlink.<sup>226</sup> The factors that Milashina had originally wrote what she saw on the KRA website that Lokot translated seemed on the ideological side:

- “the most creative and effective factor for strengthening the state system of the Russian Federation”;
- “the only efficient way of fighting international terrorism in global practice”;
- “the only hope of the Chechen people”;
- “a faithful associate of the President and Commander in Chief of Russia, who, in these difficult days, [...] proves his constant readiness to perform the assigned tasks in any part of the global geopolitical space, should such an order be given.”<sup>227</sup>

From what Lokot relayed from Milashina’s Novaya Gazeta article, the aspects of the KRA factor align with a Pro-Russian/Pro-Kadyrov regime of internet control, which is encapsulated in the slogan Akhmat-Sila and often used together to enhance loyalty to Kadyrov. The KRA factor acts

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<sup>225</sup> Lokot, Tanya. “The KRA Factor: The Shaming of Kadyrov’s Online Critics.” *Global Voices* (blog), February 20, 2016. <https://globalvoices.org/2016/02/20/the-kra-factor-the-shaming-of-kadyrovs-online-critics/>.

<sup>226</sup> Lokot, The KRA Factor, blog.

<sup>227</sup> Lokot, The KRA Factor, blog.

as an ideological method to control critics, which are often those who do not agree with Kadyrov or his slogan Akhmat-Sila.

Around the same time as the May 2020 sanctions were implemented, a Grozny online news outlet posted a video of Ramzan Kadyrov explaining what Akhmat-Sila means. Kadyrov's personal definition of the slogan does not stray from what was said from the Kadyrovtsy Commander Chelaev, but with the addition of why allahu-akbar is often added in conjunction with the slogan:<sup>228</sup>

When we say "Akhmat-Power", some say: "Allah-Power". Allah Almighty is Almighty! But people can also have strength. But in this case we mean the path of Akhmat-Hadji and those who follow this path. When we say "Akhmat-Power" we always add "Allahu Akbar", glorifying the Almighty Creator and ask for help from him, - concluded the head of the republic.<sup>229</sup>

In Chelaev's explanation of Akhmat-Sila, he mentions Akhmad-Hadji's path. This path is the ideological path he took when he sided with the Russian Federation during the Chechen Wars, leading to the creation of a New Chechnya. This path also likens Akmad-Hadji to a saint, taking the holy road for his people, with his disciples following the trail he treaded. In addition, with Kadyrov's definition included, we can now make more sense on why allahu-akbar is added with almost every Akhmat-Sila. This phenomenon is seen in various comments on his former Kadyrov.\_95 profile. Kadyrov is engaging in facework to not upset some of his more religious followers and had to re-contextualize the slogan's position within the realm of Sufi Islam and its more adherent practitioners. Unfortunately, the Kadyrov.\_95 data regarding his original posts performing this facework was lost in the May 2020 sanctions. Luckily, the slogan's proliferation

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<sup>228</sup> Translation: "Когда мы говорим «Ахмат-Сила», некоторые говорят: «Аллах-Сила». Всевышний Аллах – Всемогуший! А вот сила может быть и у людей. Но в данном случае мы имеем ввиду путь Ахмата-Хаджи и тех, кто следует этому пути. Когда мы говорим «Ахмат-Сила» мы всегда добавляем «Аллаху Акбар», прославляя Всевышнего Творца и просим помощи у него, - заключил руководитель республики."

<sup>229</sup> Grozny-Inform. "Рамзан Кадыров разъяснил значение лозунга «Ахмат – Сила» | Информационное агентство 'Грозный-Информ,'" May 28, 2020. <https://www.grozny-inform.ru/news/society/119498/>.

with the religious auxiliary can be found on Instagram through hashtags, visuals, and embedding in posts throughout his entourage, security forces, fighters, and supporters. However, not all Chechens recirculate the slogan, but criticize it.

### **Musa Lomaev: Akhmat-Sila Critic**

Over the last year there has been push back to Kadyrov's slogan, but the criticism can be very hard to maintain in the virtual world. A Second Chechen War refugee and an ardent regime critic, Musa Lomaev considers Akhmat-Sila not Chechen at all, but rather a cliché.

Unfortunately, Lomaev's original video on Akhmat-Sila was taken offline just recently early in mid-January 2021 and has asked kindly of all who have his videos saved to "delete them."<sup>230</sup>

This erasure of data is due to a failed Kadyrov-backed assassination attempt with a "half a million US dollars for Lomaev's head" from the Chechen government, leading to more backlash for keeping the mocking videos up.<sup>231</sup> This failed attempt to end Lomaev's life created problems for his family members still living in Chechnya and caused him to take measures to protect them from unwanted violence.

Fortunately, one of Lomaev's followers previously posted the Akhmat-Sila criticism video on his own personal channel describing how the slogan is not Chechen with Lomaev's original link to the video, which is now defunct. Keep in mind, that the following video will possibly go down soon in response to Lomaev's wishes to remove all content for the sake of his family still in Chechnya. The screenshot included will also be used as a heuristic in case it does go down and will be carefully displayed and elaborated on. In the figure below Lomaev criticizes the slogan as being a cowardly slogan:

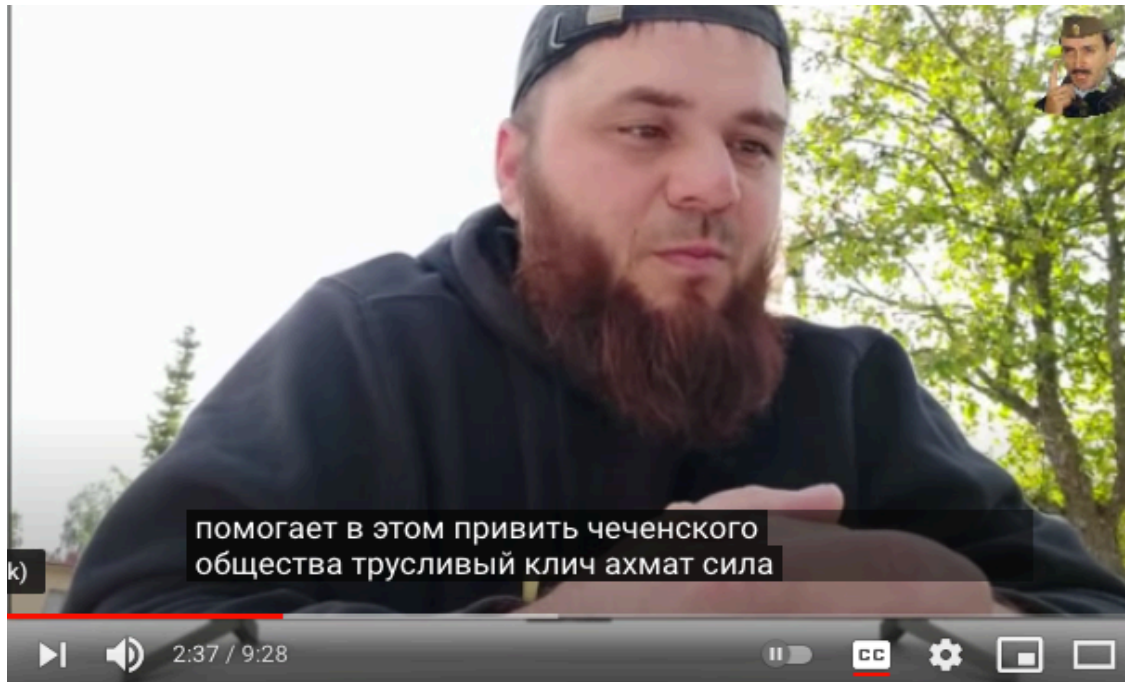
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<sup>230</sup> YouTube TV Caucasus. *Musa Lomaev Asks to Delete All His Videos (2021)*, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkBkX-mhr7g>.

<sup>231</sup> Узел, Кавказский. "Attempt on Chechen Blogger Lomaev Failed in Finland." Caucasian Knot, August 12, 2020. <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/52111/>.



Figure 4.18



Lomaev elaborates on the fallacies of the slogan in Chechen society. Notice the General Dudayev icon in the top right corner, an obvious show of where Lomaev ideologically stands, for a free, traditional, and independent Chechnya. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKScVD4K6gA>

In figure 4.18, Lomaev's criticism of Akhmat-Sila is imperative for that fact that not only that it is one of the only known recorded public criticisms of the slogan, but that he lets other young Chechens know that the slogan "is a justification of the genocide of the Chechen people in 1944."<sup>232</sup> Not only does Lomaev add a painful historical Chechen collective memory from era's past, but adds on recent Chechen history. Lomaev utilizes a recent Chechen collective memory similar to Akhmat-Sila's usage. Lomaev uses pathos in a way that contradicts the Kadyrov regime's view, saying the slogan means that they approve of the pains of the Chechen wars for every "zachistka,"<sup>233</sup> every tear their mothers and sisters felt, and every pain the Chechen people

<sup>232</sup> Shishiani, Abu Mouslim. МУСА ЛОМАЕВ: МОЕ ПРЕДУПРЕЖДЕНИЕ КАДЫРОВСКОЙ СВОРЕ, КОНЕЦ НАСТУПИТ. 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKScVD4K6gA>.

<sup>233</sup> Cleansing operations conducted in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Chechen Wars by Russians and later Pro-Russian Chechens used to weed out suspected "terrorists," but often targeted innocent Chechens who happened to be a male between the ages of 15-55 to be imprisoned in a deep pit dug into the earth to either be tortured, imprisoned for questioning, or arbitrarily killed, or often a mixture of 2 out of the 3 aspects.



felt in then and that some continue to feel after the wars. Lomaev continues to preach on what is important in life(freedom) to his young Chechen listeners, noting that all things in life change, just like the traditional academic social mobility the Soviet Union offered to Chechens that now ceases to exists, and when the Russian regime falls that the material riches of Kadyrov's regime will not continue.

Lomaev's perspective on the slogan offers a counter-weight in a sea of Kadyrov's influence, which dominates Chechnya and the only one with impunity to any sort of check. Lomaev also offers an outlier in the significance of Akhmat-Sila and the collective memory that it entails to Chechen society. Consequently, Kadyrov is still able to strong arm a critic with his abusive power and still manage to get what he desires, silence. Kadyrov himself though, loves to speak, and Kadyrov will go to many lengths to get on social media, even if it means posing as a tourism site.

### **Kadyrov's Current Account**

One account can be assured as Kadyrov's, @ya\_pomoshnik\_kra\_95. This account first received attention in a Russian Sports News outlet, when MMA middleweight Chechen-Swedish fighter Khamzat Chimaev visited the homeland and was recorded play fighting with Kadyrov's son.<sup>234</sup> The article states that Kadyrov wrote it on the Instagram account, underscoring how it is possible to be a true Chechen away from the region, "Friends, Khamzat Chimaev's visit to the republic has demonstrated that you can remain a real Chechen, living thousands of kilometers from Daimokhk, if you have a desire and correct upbringing."<sup>235</sup> This is a form of Kadyrov's

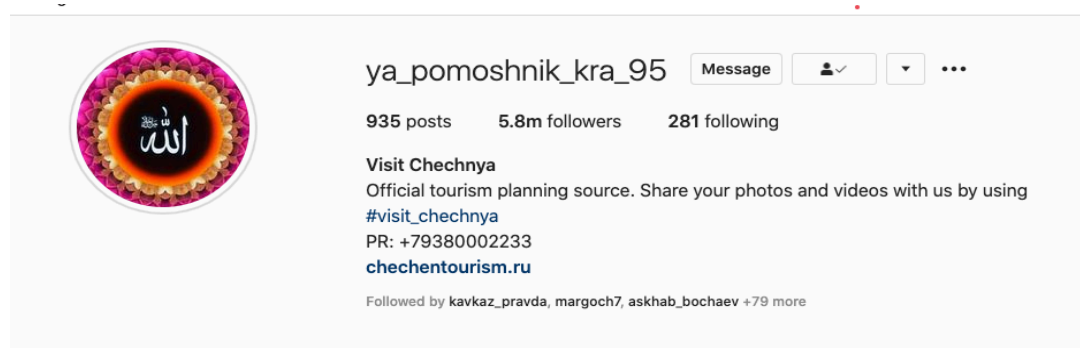
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<sup>234</sup> Smith, Dasha. "Кадыров Про Чимаева: «Можно Оставаться Настоящим Чеченцем, Живя За Тысячи Километров От Даймохка. Мы Верим в Тебя, Хамзат! Ахмат-Сила!»." Sports.ru, January 18, 2021. <https://www.sports.ru/boxing/1093072864-kadyrov-pro-chimaeva-mozhno-ostavatsya-nastoyashhim-chechencem-zhivya.html>.

<sup>235</sup> Smith, Кадыров Про Чимаева, Website.

patronage and acceptance to young people who display Checheness in a way that correlates to his ideal on the international stage. This ideal is primarily concerned with personal conduct and in that in the octagon/ring as a warrior, a personage worthy of the slogan, Akhmat-Sila. Also, the amount of hashtags for Akhmat-Sila increased by 10,694 posts since the last time counted towards the end of January 2021. The current date at this point is February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. Below in figure 4.19 is Kadyrov's account:

Figure 4.19



Source: [www.instagram.com/ya\\_pomoshnik\\_kra\\_95](https://www.instagram.com/ya_pomoshnik_kra_95)

Upon further investigation, the page at first sight appears to be a tourist page, but can be accurately identified as Kadyrov's profile due to the amount of contacts in common, followers, and the recirculated tagged posts with this profile as the official Kadyrov account. There are many followers in common, bringing to about 82 contacts, many of which are Chechen government officials and or extensions of the armed forces, administration, or fight clubs. The official tourist website in the account bio is in line with positive local branding, demonstrating that Chechnya is open to the possibility of foreigners coming to see the region, more than likely to add to Kadyrov's credibility that Chechnya has reached a level of security it has never seen before. The Arabic inscription on the default photo means "God," or Allah in pronunciation.

Kadyrov's nephew, Khamzat Kadyrov, gives legitimacy that this page is Kadyrov's actual account. In Khamzat's photo, not only does he label Kadyrov as "dear father," but also

links Kadyrov to this account with a hyperlink tag to the profile, connecting the strongman to the account. This linkage in figure 4.20 is important because Khamzat, although in all technicalities Kadyrov's nephew, is his adopted son since Zelimkhan, Kadyrov's older brother, was killed in 2004. Thus, Khamzat's acknowledgement provides the evidence to confirm this page as Kadyrov's:

Figure 4.20



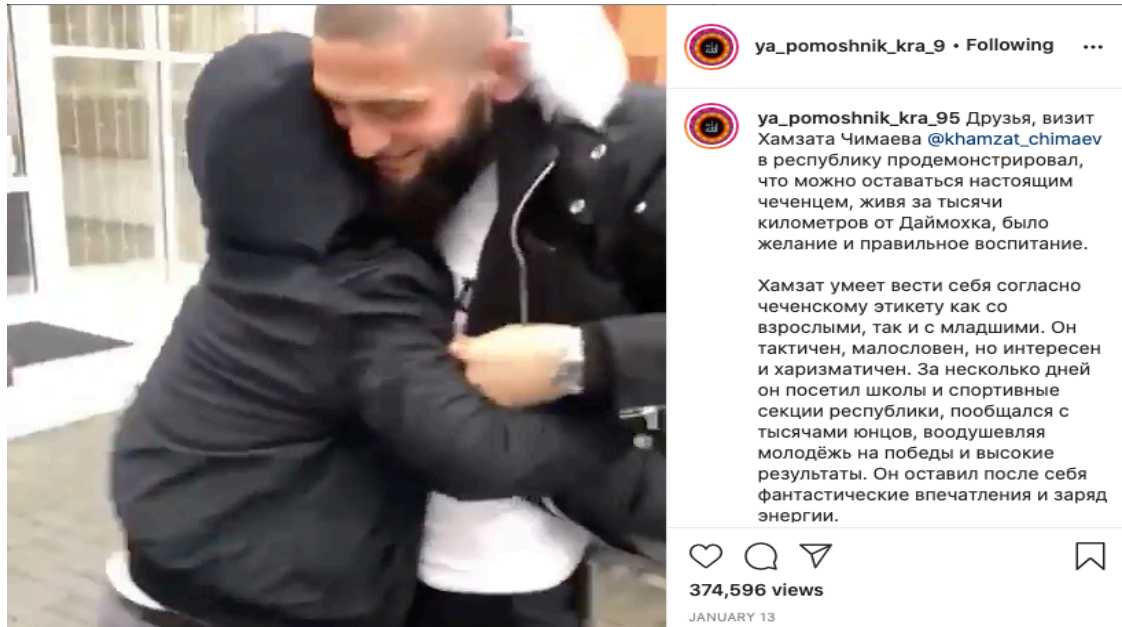
January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKOgSt6Dbi/>

Not only in figure 4.20 above but through Khamzat's Instagram account, you can see similar linkages to his uncle/adopted father throughout his entire profile.<sup>236</sup> Although Khamzat's posting frequency is less than others within the regime circle, he actively displays his involvement in local government life, shooting at the Russian Special Forces university, engaging in sport with emphasis on the combat variety, homage to his uncle, and of course the image of his grand-father Akhmad-Hadji on material items and posts.

<sup>236</sup> Bugor\_jr. "Khamzat Kadyrov, Instagram Photos and Videos." Accessed February 18, 2021. [https://www.instagram.com/bugor\\_jr/](https://www.instagram.com/bugor_jr/).

Following this Instagram account confirmation, we can enter the linked post on the Russian sports outlet to view the Instagram account with Kadyrov's idealization of Chimaev's Chechen upbringing in its entirety:

Figure 4.21



Khamzat Chimaev play fighting with Ramzan's son, displaying Chechen values. January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

@ya\_pomoshnik\_kra\_95's comment can be translated as:

Friends, the visit of Khamzat Chimaev to the republic demonstrated that you can remain a real Chechen, living thousands of kilometers from Daimokhk, there was a desire and proper upbringing[sic]. Khamzat knows how to behave according to Chechen etiquette both with adults and with youngsters. He is tactful, obscure, but interesting and charismatic. In a few days, he visited schools and sports sections of the republic, talked with thousands of young people, encouraging young people to win and achieve high results. He left behind a fantastic experience and a boost of energy. Probably, it is for such natural qualities that his fans love him not only in Chechnya, but also far beyond its borders. I am sure that the main victories of Khamzat are still ahead, and he will definitely please us with beautiful and bright endings of the fights. We believe in you, Khamzat! Akhmat-Power!<sup>237</sup>

With this quote in figure 4.21, we can see Kadyrov's elevation of his ideal form of Chechen identity to the international stage. This pedestaling is important because Kadyrov's

<sup>237</sup> The translation is the best of my ability, any discrepancies does not take away from the message conveyed.

praise of a fellow successful Chechen who maintained his values leads to effective branding of Chimaev by associating good morals and upbringing with his slogan, Akhmat-Sila. This association of morals with the slogan also give a physical representation of the slogan, a point where supporters can look up to and see what can be reached, giving a positive connotation to many looking to lead a successful life in the Chechen sense. This successful life could be obtained through service in the regime, enlistment in the armed forces, or becoming a prize fighter in one of Kadyrov's fight clubs. In addition, Chimaev's displacement from the region also demonstrates that the slogan is not localized. However, this current example is just to give a preview of how the slogan has developed. To provide more background of Akhmat-Sila's spread in popular culture across the Russo-Islamic sphere, we will examine a song where Akhmat-Sila is quite prevalent.

### **Timati's Song "Grozny"**

Timati, formally known as Timur Ildarovich Yunusov, is a Russian rap artist. Timati was born to a Tartar father and a Jewish mother. Known for propagandistic music, Timati has often praised Putin and Russia in a few songs, most notably in "My Best Friend is President Putin," which echoes Timati's support of the regime and "Moskva," which praises the city and its government, received public backlash for not supporting anti-government protests.<sup>238</sup> Scout Mills delves further into Timati's importance to the rebranding of Russia and expanding his own personal brand, Black Star.<sup>239</sup> Mills underscores that Timati is so important for promoting contemporary Russian culture that the Russian Orthodox Church wanted him to push their

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<sup>238</sup> Spinnin' Records. *Саша Чест Feat. Тимати - Лучший Друг (Премьера Клипа, 2015)*, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jp9pfvneKf4>.

<sup>239</sup> Mills, Scout. "Hip-Hop Lifestyle Branding and Russian Ethno-Nationalism: The Case of Timati." *NYU Jordan Center* (blog), April 2, 2018. <http://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/scout-mills-on-timati-part-i/>.

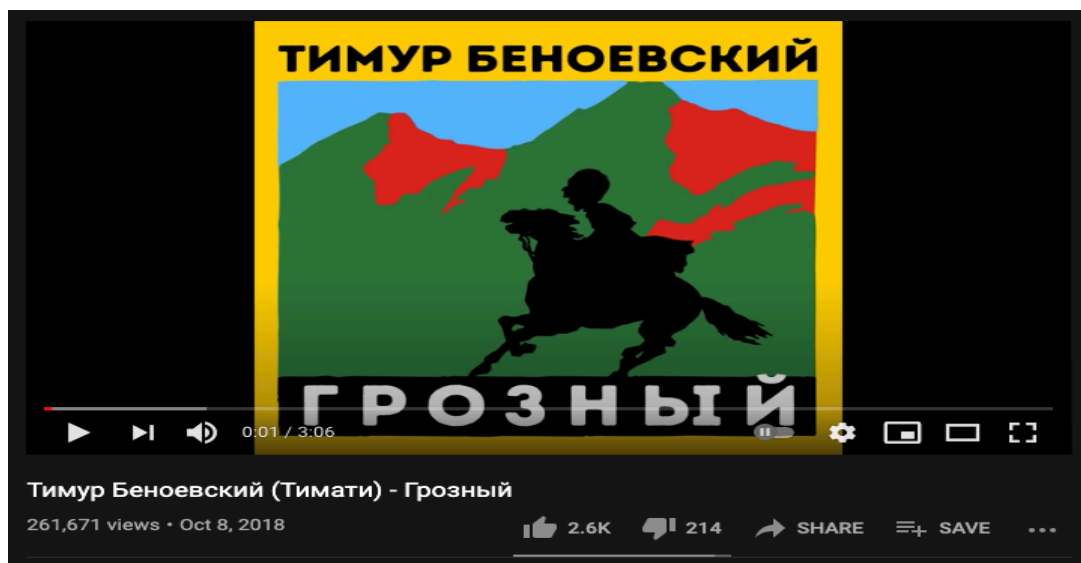
agenda of having young people listen to classic Russian texts through modern vocals, as

Metropolitan Tikhon states:

Этот год мы хотим посвятить русской классике, пригласить самые популярные ансамбли и исполнителей. Например, если бы группа «Ленинград» исполнила какую-нибудь песню на стихи Пушкина, Лермонтова, Тютчева и так далее, это бы возмутило одно поколение, но это бы услышало другое. Каких-то еще исполнителей [можно привлечь], Тимати например.<sup>240 241</sup>

The praise does not only stop there, it extends much further south to Grozny to Putin's right hand man, Chechen Strongman Ramzan Kadyrov. Here, we will start on the journey of how Akhmat-Sila became to be and is now circulated orally and textually, digitally online and offline. Below, is the cover for the song "Grozny." One noticeable feature is that Timati goes by another alias, Timur Benoevsky:

Figure 4.22



Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZC0Q4yt9Zw&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZC0Q4yt9Zw&feature=emb_title)

<sup>240</sup> Нараева, Darya. "В РПЦ предложили привлечь Шнура и Тимати к популяризации русской культуры." РБК. Accessed January 25, 2021. <https://www.rbc.ru/society/09/03/2017/58c175e09a79477024f234da>.

<sup>241</sup> Translation: We want to devote this year to Russian classics, to invite the most popular ensembles and performers. For example, if the Leningrad group performed a song to the verses of Pushkin, Lermontov, Tyutchev, and so on, this would anger one generation, but another would hear it. Some other performers [can be attracted], Timati for example.

This alias in figure 4.22 could be used to delineate the song from the wider Russian crowds who may disapprove of the song. But, if one knows the Chechen world of Instagram, Benoevsky is a name that signals to the Benoi teip in Chechnya. Other than the change up in Timati's alias to signal to Kadyrov's clan, the lyrics in the song emphasizes Grozny as this city home to a benevolent leader with heroes and history. The translated lyrics go like this:<sup>242</sup>

1<sup>st</sup> Couplet: Assalam aleikum, transit Moscow to Grozny  
Half month in the sky, serious conversation And this bit of the column blows to pieces  
24/7 Timur Benoevsky Who does not understand, he will understand - no question  
Who should I be afraid of in the forest, if I am a greyhound(wolf) with these kind of  
strikes, fate does not wear  
With brothers ahead, Akhmat strength!

Chorus: And it was no coincidence then that the stars converged.  
But what is this empty talk? I was born in Grozny.  
Now, in life, the horseman acts beautifully.  
You hear, this is the Caucasus,  
Akhmat is power!

A proud, confident look, a serious attitude.  
Welcome to our city of Grozny. Now, a horseman does beautifully in life.  
You hear, this is the Caucasus,  
Akhmat is power!

The second verse: Timur Benoevsky Gudermes raises his hands with me  
The boys in Shali know these sounds  
From Urus Martan Argun Veduchi  
They know these texts, all the bearded men  
Yes, this is Russia, this is the city of Grozny  
He is for the strong in spirit  
This is a serious approach  
Welcome home, as Ramzan says. worthy, strengthen the Imam

Chorus: And it was no coincidence then that the stars converged.  
But what is this empty talk? I was born in Grozny.  
Now, in life, a horseman acts beautifully.  
You hear, this is the Caucasus,  
Akhmat is power!

A proud, confident look, a serious attitude.  
Welcome to our city of Grozny.

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<sup>242</sup> Listen to the link in the next footnote for an auditory experience.

Now, a horseman acts beautifully in life.  
You hear, this is the Caucasus,  
Akhmat is power!<sup>243</sup>

After reading the lyrics, you can notice a few instances of indexing to certain areas of Chechen identity. In the first couplet the most interesting word that is not always clear in translation is “Borz.”<sup>244</sup> In Russian the word can mean greyhound, in which does not correlate the same qualities of aggressiveness nor bravery such as the Chechen translation, which means “wolf.” If the context is misinterpreted, you arrive to a mental visual of a Tsarist canine that is better at sport hunting and races than its primordial ancestor’s imagery of pack identity and collective nature ready to defend. This historical natural imaginary of the wolf in the forest reinforces the relational identity many Chechens have with the animal and the land over the centuries, defending his or her home territory from invaders.

Another imaginary involving cultural lore is that of the horseman. The horsemen are the traditional warriors who often did *nabegs*(raids) and became *abregs*(outlaws) that would live in the mountains to evade capture. The horseman is a common character in the Caucasus in Russian literature and local culture, with many inhabitants possessing horsemanship skills. The horse stills exists, but more commonly by vehicles having high horse power. Ramzan Kadyrov himself once led one of the biggest Calvary rides in recent history with approximately 1200 men in traditional attire.<sup>245</sup>

Another cultural aspect present in the lyrics is the call out to the men from a few cities south of Grozny and the resort town of Veduchi, where a new ski resort was opened in 2018,

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<sup>243</sup> To see the original Russian lyrics, visit the YouTube video:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZC0Q4yt9Zw&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZC0Q4yt9Zw&feature=emb_title)

<sup>244</sup> Taranov, Andrei. *Read Theme-Based Dictionary: British English-Chechen - 3000 Words*. Accessed January 28, 2021. <https://www.scribd.com/book/195519048/Theme-Based-Dictionary-British-English-Chechen-3000-words>.

<sup>245</sup> Vesti News. Ramzan Kadyrov Leads the Cavalry! Record Breaking Horse Expedition Crosses the Caucasus, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4ln9FL\\_vO8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4ln9FL_vO8).



displaying the progress Chechnya has made since the end of the “Chechenisation” period.<sup>246</sup> The men Timati labels as “borodachi” or “the bearded ones,” signifies to their adherence to Islam and to the suras of the Koran, or rather their form of Sufism that is mixed with Chechen *adat*. Regardless if a bearded male is adherent or not, this identification stretches into the religious realm as a rallying cry.

The most interesting aspect of the song arrives when Timati harmonizes “Yes, this is Russia, this is the city of Grozny” noting that the city is still an undeniable part of mother Russia and Kadyrov will welcome those who come home to make Chechnya and Russia great. This verses calls to the Chechen diaspora to pick up from the countries they took refuge in during the Chechen war years and to come back to be a part of the new Chechnya. However, this verse is very important to its relation to the slogan Akhmat-Sila because the slogan is also intertwined with the KRA factor, which can be taken as insidious. The KRA factor is often used in the context of disciplining dissidents such as Musa Lomaev, Chechen separatists who fled to Europe, and incorporating rebels who did not want to be killed, but made into a “foot soldier” of Kadyrov as explored in chapter one and as demonstrated in figure 4.17.

### **Kadyrov’s Fight Clubs, Patronage, and Duty**

Now that we have explored related social media keywords of Akhmat-Sila on Chechen government Instagram accounts and in music, we will take a look at the slogan’s circulation, appearances, and significance in Kadyrov’s combat-sport organizations. These organizations are vital for Kadyrov because they provide an outlet to the world on Chechen prowess and bravado in the ring and to demonstrate Chechen warrior culture. Mac Schneider highlights this aspect,

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<sup>246</sup> Kramer, Andrew E. “It’s All Downhill in Chechnya, This Time at a Ski Resort.” *The New York Times*, January 31, 2018, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/31/world/europe/russia-chechnya-ski-resorts.html>.

noting that “Kadyrov uses social media to craft a warrior persona that is based in historical notions of Chechen identity.”<sup>247</sup> Karim Zidan’s statement adds this notion of Kadyrov’s combat sport activities as such; “He popularized combat sports in Chechnya by elevating Chechen fighters to elite social status, creating structured facilities and gyms, and propagating the idea that proficiency in combat sports such as MMA is part of Chechen manhood.”<sup>248</sup> This popularization of sport for Chechens also extends out of the region to certain members of the diaspora, such as the earlier example of Kadyrov’s approval of undefeated Swedish-Chechen UFC Middle-Heavyweight Khamzat Chimaev and his visit to the homeland in January 2021. Kadyrov finds every opportunity to stretch his influence farther and farther. Ultimately, Kadyrov’s goal stretches beyond local branding, but rather, international branding of the best regional fighters to join his “mixed martial arts empire that exports fighters to the UFC.”<sup>249</sup>

Preferably, he would like these prized fighters to come out of his personal clubs. However, on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018 Kadyrov’s inspirations only grew when neighboring Dagestani fighter Khabib Nurmagomedov laid-out Conner McGregor at UFC 229 bring home the UFC belt.<sup>250</sup> Seizing the moment, Kadyrov patronized Khabib as if he was one of his fighters, obliging him with a “new Mercedes and recognized him as an honorary citizen of Chechnya...” branding

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<sup>247</sup> Schneider, Mac. Ramzan Kadyrov: Brutal Tyrant, Instagram Star. Vox, 2017.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_bYic1R0i28&t=12s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_bYic1R0i28&t=12s).

<sup>248</sup> Zidan, Karim. “UFC Champ Kamaru Usman Visits Chechen Dictator Ramzan Kadyrov’s MMA Fight Club.” Bloody Elbow, November 26, 2020. <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2020/11/26/21721674/ufc-champ-kamaru-usman-chechen-dictator-ramzan-kadyrovs-mma-fight-club-politics>.

<sup>249</sup> NPR. “Chechen Leader’s MMA Empire: A Tool For Propaganda And More.” NPR.org, July 31, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/31/540652582/chechen-leaders-mma-empire-a-tool-for-propaganda-and-more>.

<sup>250</sup> To see Khabib jump the cage, visit :TRT World. *Khabib Nurmagomedov Jumps the Cage after Belting Conor*, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5G1G7ExcZKc>.

Khabib worthy of the Chechen title and sending a message to those who do not know his patronage yet that material wealth and social status comes with octagon or ring domination.<sup>251</sup>

Although Kadyrov's fight clubs has been known locally for a few years now and slowly internationally, the U.S. Government did not take notice of his emerging sports network until a little later, after realizing Instagram was not his only influential method. In consequence, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed stricter sanctions, to include sanctions on all of Kadyrov's sport enterprises. The US Treasury Department even went as far to restrict his notorious slogan in any UFC sanctioned ring with sport journalist Alexander Kruglov stating, "the fighters will not be able to shout the chant "Akhmat Sila", they will not come out to the song "You represent the legendary club Akhmat,"<sup>252</sup> known to all fighting fans, and somehow associate themselves with the club."<sup>253</sup>

Here, the significance of Akhmat-Sila is branded as a slogan that many fighters, fans, and hopefuls culturally identify with and its significance of progress, reaching octagons far from home on a new level never reached before, only to be denied the cry that encapsulates all that collective memory of hardship and struggles of the past 20 years. The U.S Treasury Department's late realization of Kadyrov's sports influence showed that they had underestimated his combat-sport activities beforehand. The slogan's proliferation caused the department to notice that they were not exactly being effective against Kadyrov by only closing his Instagram

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<sup>251</sup> Zucker, Joseph. "UFC's Khabib Nurmagomedov Poses for Picture with Chechen Leader Ramzan Kadyrov." Bleacher Report, February 4, 2019. <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2819319-ufcs-khabib-nurmagomedov-poses-for-picture-with-chechen-leader-ramzan-kadyrov>.

<sup>252</sup> In the original Russian: "...бойцы не смогут кричать коронное «Ахмат сила», не будут выходить под известную всем фанатам боёв песню «Ты представляешь легендарный клуб Ахмат» и как-либо ещё ассоциировать себя с клубом."

<sup>253</sup> Kruglov, Alexander. "«Ахмат» — Не Сила: Как Санкции Против Кадырова Ударят По ММА в России." News.ru, December 11, 2020. <https://news.ru/martial-arts/ahmat-ne-sila-kak-sankcii-protiv-kadyrova-udaryat-po-mma-v-rossii/>.

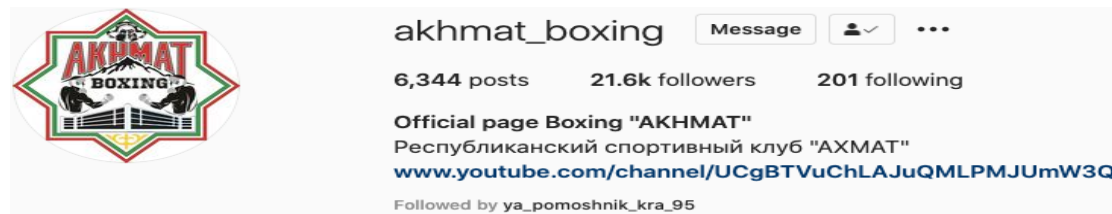
or sanctioning his family, which is more of a personal jab. But, the department decided that by limiting Kadyrov's ability to compete in US based international fight organizations, which strikes Akhmat-Sila's credibility by limiting his fighters' prospects, was a more effective route to take.

From a small start with just the MMA Akhmat Fight Club in 2014/2015, Kadyrov's fighting organizations have expanded to various areas of the culture, with one club serving boxers, the other MMA, and then a whole fight organization that was *supposed* to rival the UFC at some point in the future the ACA, among others growing for other disciplines. Within these combat-sport organizations Zidan also points out that many "Fighters who are signed to the fight club's official roster are paid monthly stipends that cover medical expenses, training costs, and travel fees. Depending on the level of success achieved, fighters are also gifted with expensive cars and other ostentatious goods."<sup>254</sup> While sanctions are still in effect, Kadyrov's aspirations will be hampered down, leaving many fighters needing to make a choice on how to go forward with their fighting careers, even with a generous patronage. If they decide to go with Akhmat Fight Clubs, they will receive immediate status and have a tangible way to see their material wealth expand in the confines of Chechnya and the greater Post-Soviet space. Or, the upcoming fighters can try to go toward the UFC and have to find gyms that are willing to train and sponsor them, many of which are out of the region and sometimes out of the country. Another avenue is to stay with the club and serve with one of the armed forces partnered with the fight clubs. Some fight and then serve Kadyrov by arming up. Here are a few of the clubs that Kadyrov operates and related content but not limited to:

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<sup>254</sup> Zidan, Karim. "UFC Champ Kamaru Usman Visits Chechen Dictator Ramzan Kadyrov's MMA Fight Club." Bloody Elbow, November 26, 2020. <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2020/11/26/21721674/ufc-champ-kamaru-usman-chechen-dictator-ramzan-kadyrovs-mma-fight-club-politics>

Figure 4.23



Official account for the boxing club. Source: [https://www.instagram.com/akhmat\\_boxing/](https://www.instagram.com/akhmat_boxing/)

Akhmat Boxing is very popular with the patronized class of fighters. A few profiles show and give thanks to the gifts and opportunities that Kadyrov has bestowed upon them. Some people show their devotion not only fighting competitively for Kadyrov, but also serving in the administration. A few visual examples are provided below:

Figure 4.24



Akhmat Boxing Head Valid Edilov, UFC Fighter Abdul-Kerim's brother, helps friend Rustam after an intense gym session in an Instagram montage. The background music is again Timati's "Grozny." At the end of the Instagram montage in tandem they chant "Akhmat-Sila!!" Brotherly call? October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3TxmR-nHON/>

Figure 4.25



A recirculated photo on Edilov's team mate's profile. Patronage for the boys with Akhmat-Sila apparel and a new black Mercedes. March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9XW9bcnWD9/>.

Figure 4.26



Akhmat Boxer Hussein Musalipov won, one of Valid Edilov's friends. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEsGQQpnesn/>

In figure 4.25, you can notice the gifts and cars being gifted. However, what is not apparent is the money reward without reading the post. The translation of what was possible to capture in the screenshot goes to this tune of, “....step by step participation in the life of club Akhmat and its pupils. By the end of the meeting from the Kadyrov fund (Chechen) all the boxers were handed over gifts and monetary rewards. Our success, your merit/service, Ramzan Akhmatovich! (Chechen) Akhmat-Sila!”<sup>255</sup> The part “Our Success, your merit” strikes at the heart of what many of the young fighters believe happens in their relationship to Kadyrov and what Akhmat-Sila means.<sup>256</sup> Not only did Musalipov encapsulate what he said with the slogan, but gives the idea that there is a connection to competitive fighting, patronage, and to a community. Figure 4.25 demonstrates these three factors with a group of competitive fighters all being gifted expensive gifts, with one gifted a Mercedes Benz, all part of Kadyrov's patronage for successful Chechens.

<sup>255</sup> Musalipov\_95. “001 (@musalipov\_95) • Instagram Photos and Videos.” Social Media. Instagram. Accessed March 31, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9XW9bcnWD9/>.

<sup>256</sup> Musalipov\_95. “001 (@musalipov\_95) • Instagram Photos and Videos.” Social Media. Instagram. Accessed March 31, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9XW9bcnWD9/>.



Figure 4.27



September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFuUm0AnK8w/>

In figure 4.27, Rustam, a friend of Edilov's, decides to demonstrate to his Russian followers what Akhmat-Sila means to him. Rustam then goes on to lift a small front-wheel drive car. This demonstration of the slogan performs to an audience, which in this case, are other Russian citizens in far off areas. In addition, in the text part of the post, Rustam reaffirms that "The slogan "Akhmat-Power" means adherence to the principles and ideology of the path indicated by the First President of the Chechen Republic Akhmad-Hadji Kadyrov. That is, we mean the path of Akhmat-Hadji and those who follow this path."<sup>257</sup> Rustam points out further that not all follow this *path*, but those who do are for Chechnya's progress:

Today schools, streets, avenues, parks, squares and squares are named after him. The Order named after Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov is awarded to the best people of our republic, the Russian Federation. His good deeds will always live in our hearts, a picture that is an example for us. The achievements that we have today in the republic under the leadership of the Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov @ ya\_pomoshnik\_kra\_95 are a worthy continuation of the path of Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov, aimed at the development of the Chechen Republic and a tribute to the memory of the First President Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov.<sup>258</sup>

<sup>257</sup> Ocherkhadzhiyev, Rustam. "@rustamocher." Social Media. Instagram. Accessed November 17, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFuUm0AnK8w/>

<sup>258</sup> Ocherkhadzhiyev, Rustam. "@rustamocher." Social Media. Instagram. Accessed November 17, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFuUm0AnK8w/>

Rustam's statements show that this path is more than a religious way of being, but the deeds and actions to develop Chechnya into something great. He does not see the slogan's proliferation as an ominous branding, but a memorialization of a worthy human being. Rustam also confers that this path is a part of Akhmat-Sila, linking the meaning of development, progress, and good will to it.

Figure 4.28



Edilov was gifted a Mercedes Benz on his birthday for yours truly, Ramzan Kadyrov. June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019.  
Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BydoCVAg9LG/>

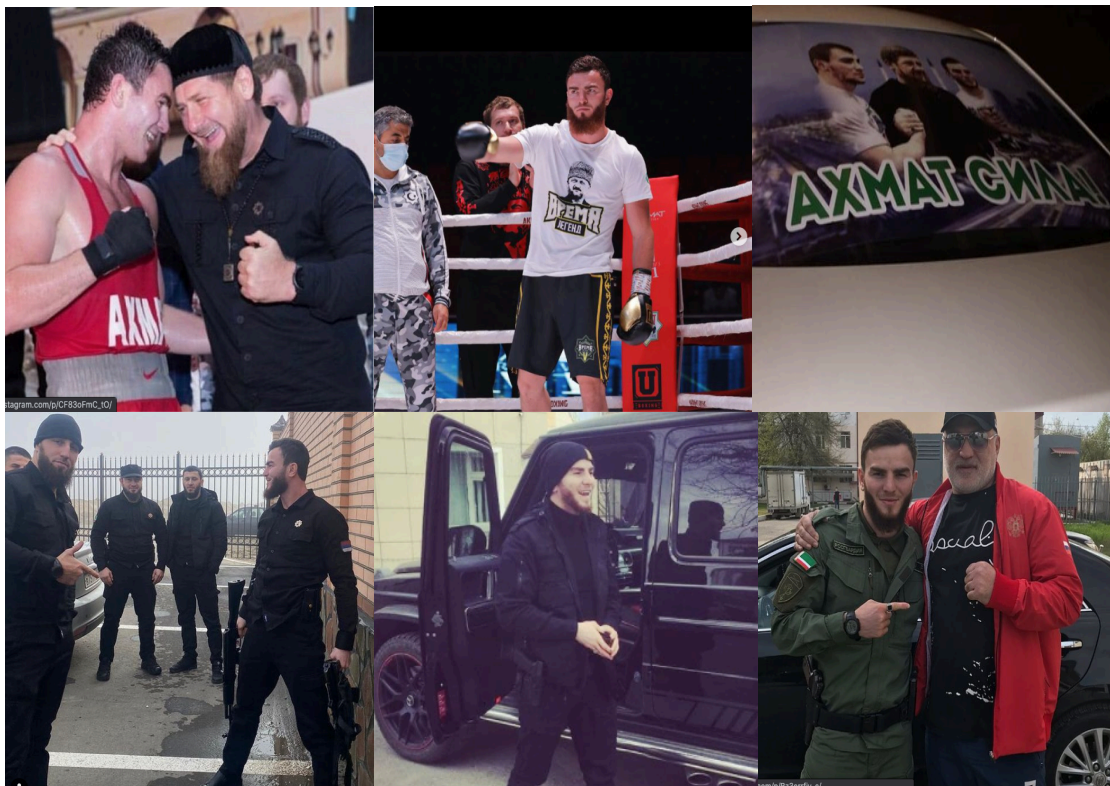
The patronage also extends to members and directors of the club for birthdays. Another theme that seems to be prevalent in Chechen Social Media is the salutation to birthdays of people who serve under Kadyrov, whether competitively or within one of his organizations. Edilov, who manages one of Kadyrov's organizations, gives thanks to Kadyrov for all that he has at the end of the post, where Edilov states "...his participation in my life, his life wisdom, and advice have



been for me a big benefit from the Almighty.”<sup>259</sup> This sentence gives the indication that Kadyrov’s appearance in his life has been so great that it must have been a benefit or gift from God himself. Many consider Kadyrov their benefactor, reaching heights they could have never dreamed of without his patronage. Not only do these actions reaffirm loyalty from a part of the young population, but they demonstrate to others what can be gained with Kadyrov’s financial support.

### Shamil Hataev: Akhmat Fight Club Boxer

Figure 4.29



Source: [https://www.instagram.com/khataev\\_voin\\_shamil/](https://www.instagram.com/khataev_voin_shamil/)

<sup>259</sup> Edilov\_valid\_kra. Social Media. Instagram, November 17, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BydoCVAg9LG/>.

Above in the figure 4.29, is Shamil Hataev, one of Akhmat Boxing Club's prized fighters.<sup>260</sup> After surfing through the Instagram account, many facets of what Akhmat-Sila means can be found throughout the later part of his profile as the slogan popularized. You can see that not only is he in good spirits with Kadyrov, but he is advertised on the back of car windows with Akhmat-Sila placed under their images. When Hataev is not fighting, he serves with the Chechen RosGvardia, easily mistaken for Kadyrovtsy when in the black uniform. Usually the Kadyrovtsy will have their name tapes signifying their regiment. Meanwhile, with RosGvardia there are no patches on the black uniform while it is visible in the green uniform. Is it possible to be in both groups? Or do the uniforms note the type of duty for the shift? Hataev is also graciously patronized with nice cars, which in one photo he stands with a Mercedes-Benz AMG G 63 SUV, MSRP on the manufacture's website at a hefty \$156,450.<sup>261</sup>

Figure 4.30



The original club. Primarily MMA centered, including training clubs across Central Asia.

Source: [https://www.instagram.com/akhmat\\_mma/](https://www.instagram.com/akhmat_mma/)

Figure 4.31



ACA Belts in all their lavish glory, similar to the UFC Championship belts. Source: [www.instagram.com/akhmat\\_mma/](https://www.instagram.com/akhmat_mma/)

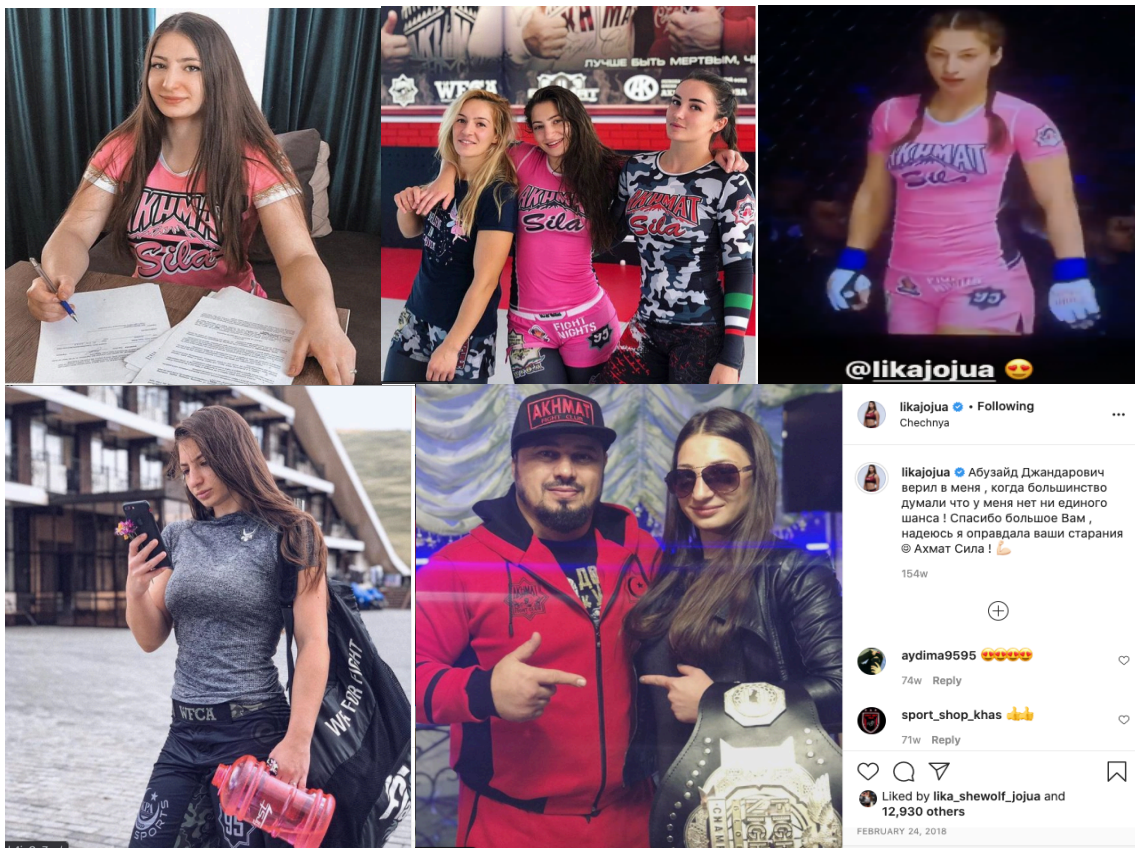
<sup>260</sup> Khataev\_voin\_shamil. Social media. Instagram. Accessed February 12, 2021. [https://www.instagram.com/khataev\\_voin\\_shamil/](https://www.instagram.com/khataev_voin_shamil/)

<sup>261</sup> If you want to see car details, visit: <https://www.mbusa.com/en/vehicles/model/g-class/suv/g63w4>

In figures 4.30 and 4.31, the Akhmat MMA Instagram account is a promotional platform for events, more birthday congratulations, and Patriot and Kadyrov supporting their fighters with training visits. There are a few notable fighters on the club's page, but overall the page promotes new competitors and amateur to intermediate fighters. Branding is everywhere. This page is male dominate and does not show the female members who belong to the club. However, I will highlight one member of the club that has made it to the UFC and is not a male nor is a native of Chechnya, but is still from the Caucasus region.

### UFC Fighter Liana Jojua: Akhmat MMA Origins

Figure 4.32



Source for all photos in this grouping: [www.instagram.com/likajojua/](https://www.instagram.com/likajojua/)

Liana Jojua, Georgian by nationality and Russian/Chechen-affiliated by fight organization, is one of the first female fighters from the Russian sphere to enter the UFC in



March 2019.<sup>262</sup> Before making her UFC debut, Jojua was primarily sponsored by Akhmat Fight Clubs, often seen hanging out with the head of all training, Vismuradov (Patriot). Jojua initially signed with Akhmat Fight Clubs because others did not give her a chance. Jojua relays this gratefulness in her post with Vismuradov, exclaiming, “Abuzaid Djandarovich believed in me when the majority thought I wouldn’t have a chance. Thanks a lot to you. I hope I justified your page. Akhmat-Sila!”<sup>263</sup> This is the first time a woman uses Akhmat-Sila in this research, using it in a positive sentiment of financial or organizational mobility. Jojua also wears the apparel at all Akhmat Fight Club organization fights and often trains in the labeled apparel.<sup>264</sup> However, this started to change. When the December 2020 U.S. sanctions came, I noticed on her profile that Jojua started to train more often in Istanbul, Turkey and now, in the United States. Although she still gives thanks and is very friendly with her Akhmat Fight Club benefactors, it seems she is keeping her associations at arm’s length to wait out and see how the UFC organization will handle the current predicament with the new sanctions.

This impediment circles back to Kruglov’s article speaking about fighters who have contracts with Kadyrov’s organization might not be able to obtain a visa to enter the United States now or at a later date. Would this affect Jojua entering the U.S. if she came to search for a new training gym? Would this cause problems if she was invited to a U.S. competition but

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<sup>262</sup> Translation of original post Top-Left Photo: “Fighter of Akhmat Fight Club Liana Jojua signs contract with the UFC. Date of debut and name of first rival in the American promotion will be revealed in the near future. Liana will perform in the 61.2 kilo weight. Remember, her record sits at 7 wins and 2 losses.” March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

Source: [www.instagram.com/za.vismuradov\\_95/](https://www.instagram.com/za.vismuradov_95/)

<sup>263</sup> Likajojua. “Liana Jojua (@likajojua) • Instagram Photos and Videos.” Social Media. Instagram, February 24, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bfkxo0ZFR-F/>

<sup>264</sup> Translation of original post Top-Left Photo: “Fighter of Akhmat Fight Club Liana Jojua signs contract with the UFC. Date of debut and name of first rival in the American promotion will be revealed in the near future. Liana will perform in the 61.2 kilo weight. Remember, her record sits at 7 wins and 2 losses.” March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

Source: [www.instagram.com/za.vismuradov\\_95/](https://www.instagram.com/za.vismuradov_95/)

politically could not participate? I do not know Jojua’s status with entry into the United States, but what is known is that she is currently in New York state training:

Figure 4.33



Translation: “Surprise! I am in New York, and already in Training (reluctant emoji).” February 2021.

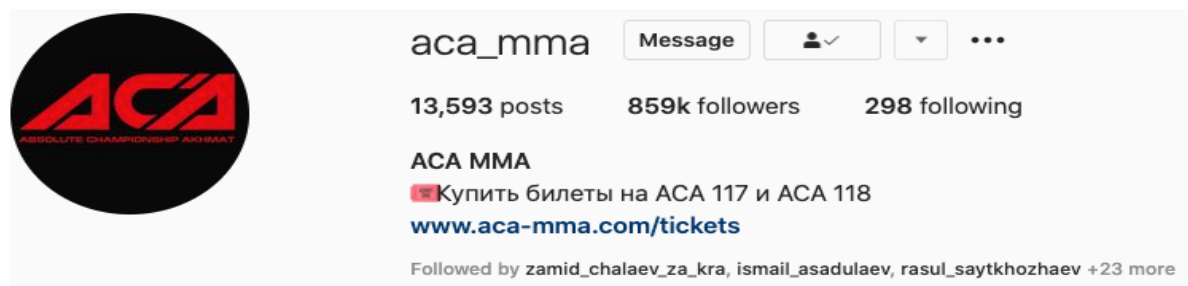
Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CK7AYt5lhGK/>

Visibly in figure 4.33, Jojua is actively training in the USA and has a training network to support extended periods. This photo relays that Jojua was able to enter the United States, regardless if her visa was old and still had time left on it or newly acquired after sanctions were already in place. Also, no Akhmat-Sila apparel was worn and there was no relevant indexing of Chechnya nor its leader. Vismuradov has put a like on her photo, unsure if there are any undertones underlying the action. Currently, Jojua has been in the United States now for seven weeks, and she has worn Akhmat-Sila apparel from time to time as the controversy settles. As of April 2021, Jojua is training at the main UFC Performance Center in Las Vegas, Nevada.

In addition to the organizations already mentioned, below are some of Kadyrov’s other fight organizations. Although worth a mention to show that they exist, these screen shots are used to show what is available on the front matter and the proliferation of various fight clubs.

Figure 4.34 shows Kadyrov's international fight organization that is supposed to one day rival the UFC. Figure 4.35 shows the less-popular but growing style of sport in Chechnya, kickboxing. Kadyrov made sure to leave no style unturned where he could dominate in the ring and demonstrate Chechnya's warrior image. Figure 4.37 shows Kadyrov's sport involvement outside of the ring, to include a bike club named after his father.

Figure 4.34



Absolute Championship Akhmat. Kadyrov's version of UFC. From the summary alone you can see it is a promotional event and structured alpha-numerically like the UFC. February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021. Source: [https://www.instagram.com/aca\\_mma/](https://www.instagram.com/aca_mma/)

Figure 4.35



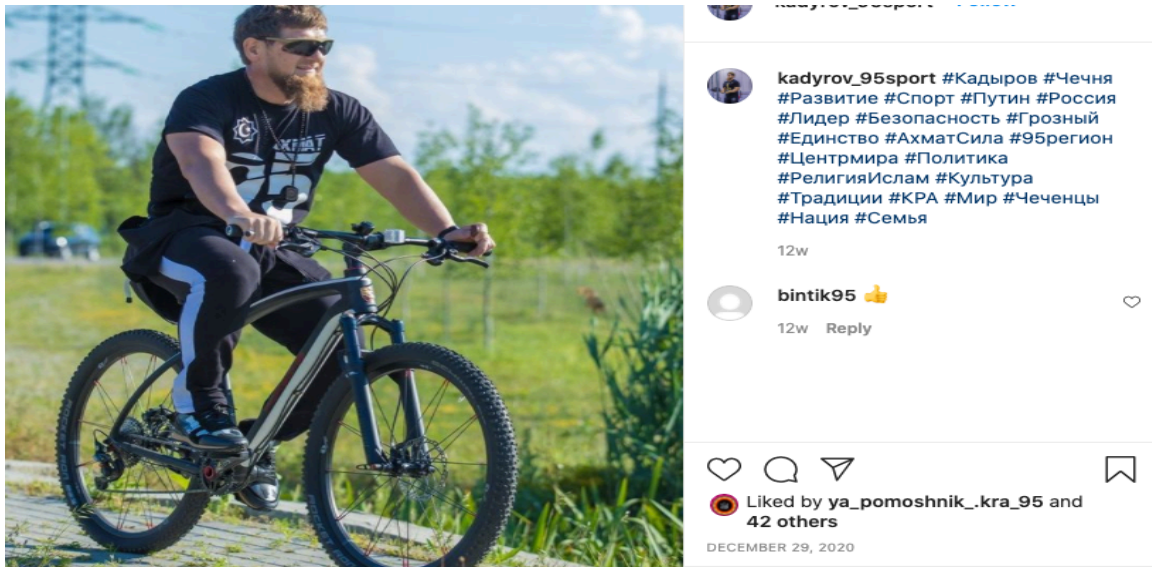
One club I did not expect Kadyrov to have. Going through the page, you see Kadyrov giving praise to fighters, advertising fights, and montages and photos of training, many in which chant Akhmat-Sila, have it written on attire, or have it painted on the gym walls. February 1<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Source: [www.instagram.com/akhmat\\_kickboxing/](http://www.instagram.com/akhmat_kickboxing/)

Figure 4.36



Source: [www.instagram/veloclub\\_akhmat/](http://www.instagram/veloclub_akhmat/)

Figure 4.37



December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Source: [www.instagram.com/kadyrov\\_95sport/](https://www.instagram.com/kadyrov_95sport/)

One area where we can see the embedded and intertextual nature of Akhmat-Sila is in this screenshot of Kadyrov on a bicycle. In the hashtag section you can see a wide array of tags that can be encompassed by the slogan.<sup>265</sup> The hashtags include but are not limited to: #Kadyrov, #Chechnya, #development, #sport, #Putin, #Russia, #Leader, #Safety, #Grozny, #Unity, #Akhmatsila, #95region, #centeroftheworld, #politics, #ReligionIslam, #Culture, #Traditions, #KRA, #Peace, #Chechens, #Nation, and #Family.<sup>266</sup> This set of data can encapsulate what the slogan signifies. You can see a Pro-Russian narrative (#Putin, #Russia, #Leader, #Safety) alongside a positive Chechen grouping (#Kadyrov, #Chechnya, #Development, #Sport) with Kadyrov particular hashtags indexing to aspects of his regime (#Akhmatsila, #95region, #centeroftheworld, #Politic, #ReligionIslam, #culture, #Traditions, #KRA, #Peace, #Chechens).

<sup>265</sup> Kadyrov\_95sport. "@kadyrov\_95sport Instagram Profile • 77 Photos and Videos." Social Media. Instagram, December 29, 2020. [https://www.instagram.com/kadyrov\\_95sport/](https://www.instagram.com/kadyrov_95sport/).

<sup>266</sup>Original Russian: #Кадыров, #Чечня, #Развитие, #Спорт, #Путин, #Россия, #Лидер, #Безопасность, #Грозный, #Единство, #АхматСила, #95регион, #Центрмира, #Политика, #РелигияИслам, #Культура, #Традиции, #КРА, #Мир, #Чеченцы, #Нация, and #Семья.

These hashtags grouped above weave different aspects of the slogan's force. The Pro-Russian hashtags signifies Kadyrov's loyalty to President Putin, highlighting that their specific relationship brings leadership and security for both parties. Putin maintains regional security and territorial integrity, while Kadyrov maintains his complete control with unlimited state funds. The Chechen hashtag group indexes to followers that Chechnya revolves around Ramzan Kadyrov, development, and sport. Any clicks on these specific hashtags will bring you to positive Chechen spheres where Kadyrov is depicted as the benevolent leader of his people, investing in development projects, and elevating the region's youth through sport through patronage, keeping them away from foreign influences.

The last grouping of hashtags is the most interesting, developing a Kadyrov centric national branding narrative. Not only are the majority of the hashtags Chechen specific (#akhmatsila #95region, #KRA, #Chechens), but offer an internal view on how Kadyrov sees Chechnya (#centeroftheworld, politics, #ReligionIslam, #Culture, #Traditions, #Peace, #Nation, and #Family). Here we can see Akhmat-Sila's significance as a reinforcement of legitimate power paired with Kadyrov's KRA factor (#KRA), its connections with the region (#95region, #Chechens), and his intertwining of the slogan with these other hashtags, making these factors inseparable. Kadyrov's slogan explicates his world view on where he wants Chechnya to rise and ultimately be recognized for internationally for: Chechen superior morals, socio-religious adherence, and political importance.

In addition to the textual signs, Kadyrov embodies many of these hashtags by his performative action in figure 4.37. Kadyrov not only performs sport by riding a bicycle, but displays his locally known semiotic devices on commodity. Kadyrov's shirt on the top left corner has a star and crescent, signifying Islam. Second, the number 95 is imprinted onto the shirt,



signifying the Chechen regional license plate code. Third, Kadyrov pays homage to his father, with his first name Akhmat printed above the 95. In a sense, Kadyrov is living what Akhmat-Sila is to him: healthy living, family memorialization, aware of his piousness, giving thanks to Russia, and branding his region in a positive light.

### **Akhmat-Sila on Infrastructure**

During this research, Akhmat-Sila was found in its usual poly-contextual forms online on various websites, social media, and on clothing, but the slogan has also been gaining ground with its appearance on infrastructure. Over the last 20 years from the Chechenisation period of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chechen War to the present day, Chechnya has been in a constant state of development and repair, despite certain areas still holding on to the essence of another era. On the contrary to the smaller villages, Grozny and a few other notable cities in the region have been modernizing and developing to a point of acceptable beautification regardless of the cult-like naming of everything after the elder Kadyrov. With state funds and full control to dictate how to design any building in the region, sometimes known by its foundation name, the *Kadyrov Fund*,<sup>267</sup> Ramzan Kadyrov has taken some initiative to use these affordances that are unique to him to give a personal touch to certain edifices and to create landmarks for the Chechen collective memory of his rule.

Memorialization seems to be a major factor in the Akhmat-Sila slogan, given that when chanted, provides a precise index to a historical period of Chechnya, signals to a certain area of the Chechen population, and normalizes the slogan along religious lines, often paired with the Islamic chant Allahu-Akbar giving thanks to God, thus sanctifying it. If there is one thing we can

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<sup>267</sup> The Kadyrov Fund is a money dispersing organization used for development, charity, pensions, stipends, patronage allowance, etc. The money comes from Moscow and by a small tithe placed on government workers' stipends. See more at: <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/48505/>

take from structures, is that often but not always, people do not destroy them, even if what is depicted on there is undesirable. Using the soviet example, you cannot just take all the signs of another era completely away. Something will always remain. Kadyrov must have looked at the ancient watch towers in Chechnya and thought to himself that if he can literally cement the slogan in concrete, that even after he is out of power peacefully, or disposed of, that the slogan will endure eternally.

One of the most recent “akhmatized” structures has been the arches to enter the city of Grozny on the Argun side in figure 4.38. Before, the old arches were decrepit and did not have much on it other than the old welcome and thank you for visiting signage on it. Now, we will take a look on how this multi-month long project came to be when it was completed:

Figure 4.38



After looking at the hashtags and the gear on top of the vehicle, it seems to be an MVD unit. January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

On October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the new arches were completed and given a ceremony. This Instagram screenshot, taken January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021, shows how one security official feels about the new arches. The main account’s comment explicates keywords to Akhmat-Sila with hashtags to Kadyrov (#akhmatsila, #Kadyrov, #KadyrovRamzan) regionally popular cars (#Mercedes,

#Bmw) Chechens (#grozny, #groznicity, #chechens, #ChechensinMoscow #Chechnya) and security organs (#MVD, #GYVDD, #PDD, #procuratura).<sup>268</sup> These hashtags catapult this image of Akhmat-Sila to audiences across Russia and the globe, with specification to the Russian security organs and Chechens. The posted comments, identified as Chechen followers through the MVD shield with Chechen flag colors on the first(@alikhadiyevv), an Islamic inscription on the second(a.r.s.48), and by Chechen language phrase on the third(mtmt1018), are supportive of the arch and its inscription. The first two supports signify approval with a thumbs-up emoji and the second comment includes a flexing arm for strength.

However, one regional opposition news source, Caucasian Knot, found less than congratulatory remarks for the arch and its slogan that takes place for a welcome on social media outlets and interviews. Memorial board member Oleg Orlov says the motto, "Akhmat is power" promotes on branding Akhmad-Hadji's cult of personality and "path" without elaborating on any meaningful achievements.<sup>269</sup> Assassination survivor Chechen Blogger Tumso Abdurakhmanov states that the slogan "... is the cultivation, but not so much of the personality of Akhmat Kadyrov, as of the regime itself, the authorities. The cry "Akhmat is power" has long been about not only and not so much about the wrestling club."<sup>270</sup> In addition, public relations director Andrey Kozlov delves into Akhmat-Sila, highlighting, "The brand is not based on the policy pursued by Kadyrov Sr. It is an appeal to young people who personify or should personify modern Chechnya, to young people who go in for sports. (This motto) is already part of the popular (culture) of the Chechen people: people [sic]they write "Akhmat is power" on their cars,

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<sup>268</sup> Original Russian hashtags: (#ахматсила, #кадыров, #кадыроврамзан), (#мерседес, #бмв), (#грозный, #грозныйсити, #чеченцы, #чеченцывмоскве #чечня), and (#мвд, #гувдд, #пдд, #прокуратура).

<sup>269</sup> Krasnov, Oleg. "Кавказский Узел | Власти Чечни Выхлостили Образ Ахмата Кадырова Формальным Поклонением." Caucasian Knot, October 10, 2020. <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/355145/>.

<sup>270</sup> Krasnov, Власти Чечни Выхлостили Образ Ахмата Кадырова Формальным Поклонением, Website.

T-shirts, phone cases, that is, on everyday objects.”<sup>271</sup> These sentiments shows that Kadyrov is personal branding the region. The slogan Akhmat-Sila invites different interpretations, with some interviewees seeing the slogan as a way to cultivate Ramzan Kadyrov’s father’s memory, actions, and greatness of the regime, while others see it as nothing to do with Akhmad-Hadji’s vision for Chechnya, but Ramzan’s.

Figure 4.39



October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIFeGkhoNCR/>

Above in figure 4.39 is the entrance to Grozny airport. This entrance signage now was not always so, as demonstrated on a Moscow photographer’s blog on his return to Chechnya 25 years later after his last visit to the region.<sup>272</sup> Alexander Nemenov’s blog is also a great source of before and after photos of Chechen infrastructure in general, showing the destruction of the Chechen Wars along with anecdotes and then, photos from his 2019 visit including an airport entrance photo, showing that the slogan was non-existent before. Both figures 4.38 and 4.39 above show something about Akhmat-Sila that is truly outstanding. Not in the artistic sense, but,

<sup>271</sup> Krasnov, Власти Чечни Выхлостили Образ Ахмата Кадырова Формальным Поклонением, Website.

<sup>272</sup> Nemenov, Alexander. “The Memories Chechnya Holds.” Correspondent, September 19, 2019. <https://correspondent.afp.com/memories-chechnya-holds>.

that something that started as a simple fight club chant evolved into something much bigger than what anyone could have imagined. The edified locations of the slogan in these examples are also positioned in frequented areas, letting visitors know who travel into Grozny the slogan before they can even fathom what it could truly mean. Below are a few more figures included to show range of the slogan on infrastructure but not limited to:

Figure 4.40



Source: [www.instagram.com/kadyrov\\_news95/](https://www.instagram.com/kadyrov_news95/)

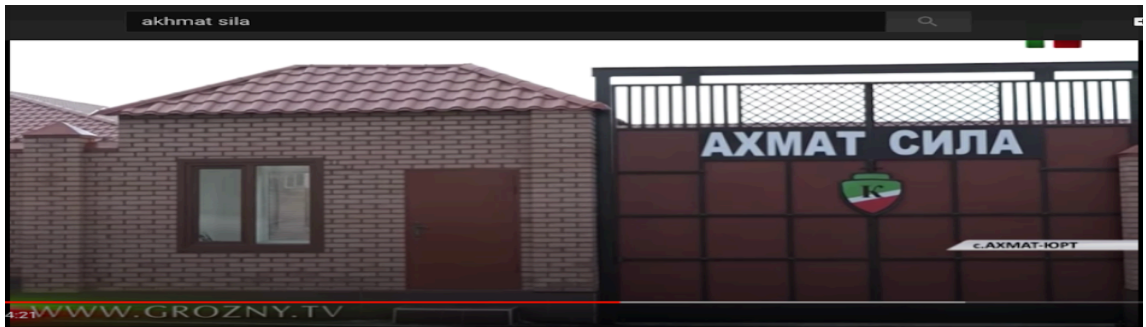
Figure 4.40 demonstrates the slogan's planning on infrastructure through a digital visualization of a future project.<sup>273</sup> This particular screenshot shows the slogan's construction in architectural efforts for further branding. This building will be a sports-health center, in line with Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechen identity formation along his lines of fitness and a sound mind. The balloons symbolize the partnership that Russia and Chechnya hold, with the Russian colors on the left and the Chechen colors on the right.

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<sup>273</sup> kadyrov\_news95. "@kadyrov\_news95 Is on Instagram • 165k People Follow Their Account." Social Media. Instagram. Accessed March 31, 2021. [https://www.instagram.com/kadyrov\\_news95/](https://www.instagram.com/kadyrov_news95/).



Figure 4.41



October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Source: Grozny.TV <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcB18EOlwZQ&list=PLLSxGimLjLMjsZrJZsNZ2inVI3hgx&index=31>

In figure 4.41 is a newly opened SOBR Terek Specialized Education Training Center, with the center's battalion patch with a letter "K" for Kadyrov in the middle and the slogan Akhmat-Sila etched into the grate iron of the gate.<sup>274</sup> Not only is the training center placed in Akhmat-Yurt, previously called Tsentaroi and the birthplace of Ramzan Kadyrov, shows at 0:22 in the video a picture of Akhmad-Hadji to the left and Ramzan on the right, united by the Islamic star with the inscription "God" in Arabic at the top, forming into triangle at the internal entrance.

Another observation in the videos shows a difference between old Chechnya and new Chechnya. MVD Chief Ruslan Alkhanov gave a speech and ended it with only "Allahu-Akbar," the traditional ending salutation historically accepted among pious Chechens. Then, at minute 2:12 SOBR Terek Commander Abuzaid Vismuradov concludes his speech with "Allahu-Akbar, Akhmat-Sila, Allahu-Akbar." Not only did Vismuradov add the slogan, but with an additional salutation to God. Afterward, one of Kadyrov's relations, SOBR Terek training center commander Abdul-Kerim Kadyrov concludes his speech with Akhmat-Sila and then prompts his trainees to chat it immediately after, then followed with a similar action for Allahu-Akbar. This dichotomy of verbal demonstrations show a separation of Chechen ideals, one that possibly

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<sup>274</sup> ЧГТРК "Грозный." *В Ахмат-Юрте Открыли Второй Корпус Специализированного Учебно-Тренировочного Центра СОБР «Терек»*, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcB18EOlwZQ&list=PLLSxGimLjLMjsZrJZsNZ2inVI3hgx&index=31>

aligns with a more traditionalist pious view of Chechnya, while the other walks the newly formed line, giving Akhmad-Hadji's elevation to holiness next to God and show of loyalty to Kadyrov as a right-hand man or a family member.

Figure 4.42



February 22th, 2021. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLmdARjoabP/>

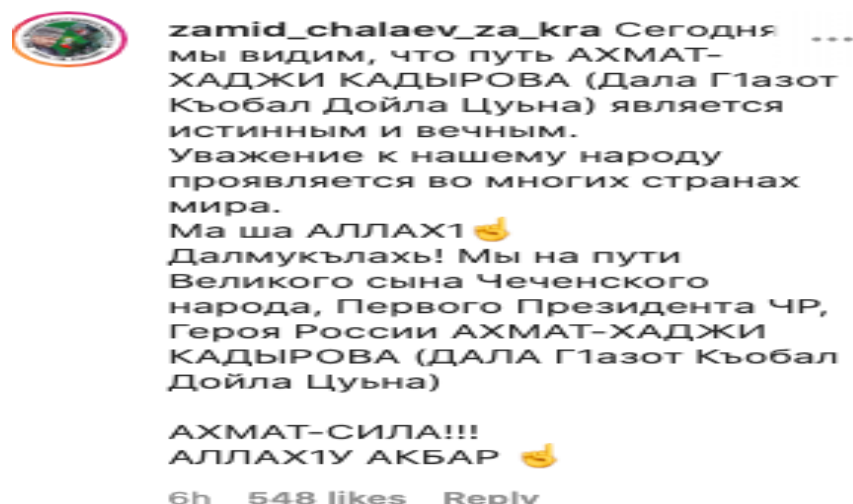
The trend we can see of Akhmat-Sila on infrastructure is that the slogan is being memorialized on everyday buildings used by all facets of society. Not a building will be left untouched at this rate. We have already seen the slogan on clothing apparel, chanted, textualized, hash-tagged, digitalized, and now on new or revitalized infrastructure. The slogan almost also acts as a watermark on all completed projects to show authorship, in case the name of the author or its encapsulating word pairing slips someone's mind, can be easily retrieved.

Here, what is important is that the slogan is being recognized internationally and not just within Chechnya as a signifier of the Chechen nation. The final and most recent aspect of Akhmat-Sila on infrastructure comes in a holographic form. On February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021 in Dubai, UAE, Kadyrov and his entourage visited the city-state on a business-relations trip and a holographic lighting of his father with the words Akhmat-Sila appeared under his face on the

world's tallest building, the Burj Khalifa, during dinner.<sup>275</sup> In figure 4.42 you can see the immensity of the holographic image, taking up the entire physical space of the building. This saturation of the building's physical space with the holographic likeness of Akhmad-Hadji's image acts as a predictor of the slogan's proliferation, now apparent on the World's tallest building at one of the Islamic World's economic centers. In the comments section you can see the Chechen RosGvardia giving their support, stating, "A little region in which knows the whole world thanking Ramzan Akhmatovich Kadyrov! Masha Allah! [Chechen] Akhmat-Sila Allahu-Akbar!"<sup>276</sup> Not only is this post proliferating at this moment, but members are all making sure to add their homages to a historic moment for Chechnya, with one of its martyrs being displayed on the world stage.

One Example in figure 4.43, the Kadyrovtsy Commander Zamid Chelaev made sure to give his thoughts on what this event meant:

Figure 4.43



Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLmdARjoabP/>

<sup>275</sup> Ya\_pomoshnik\_kra\_95. "Instagram Video by Visit Chechnya • Feb 22, 2021 at 10:15 AM." Social Media. Instagram, February 22, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLmdARjoabP/>.

<sup>276</sup> ya\_pomoshnik\_kra\_95. "Instagram Video by Visit Chechnya • Feb 22, 2021 at 10:15 AM." Social Media. Instagram, February 22, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLmdARjoabP/>.



Chelaev adds, “ Today we see, that the path of Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov [Chechen] is true and eternal. Respect to our people appears in many countries of the world. Masha Allah. We are on the path of the great son of the Chechen people, of the first President of the Chechen Republic, Hero of Russia, Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov [Chechen] Akhmat-Sila-Allahu-Akbar.”<sup>277</sup> This thought is only one of many that can be collectivized by Kadyrov’s entourage and fellow officials in the comment section, but currently hard to follow due to the massive amount of comments being added. We can see through infrastructure, Ramzan Kadyrov has successfully spread the slogan Akhmat-Sila not only on local buildings and monuments, but on an internationally recognized building as a holographic mobile image in a highly visited locality, Dubai. This path that Chelaev speaks of, although unclear at the beginning, seems to be the path to world recognition. Now, we will move on to the slogan’s proliferation locally within Kadyrov’s armed forces.

### **Akhmat-Sila in Chechen Armed Forces**

As we identified earlier in this research, many Instagram pages of the local armed forces are public and show unobliging support for Kadyrov’s government and provide legitimate armed support to the slogan Akhmat-Sila. Almost every page signals this support with a handful of keywords in their posts or profile names and homage to Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov on the profile summary at the top of the Instagram account. Along with these organization accounts, Kadyrov’s entourage often follows suit and re-circulates many supporting posts and offer birthday salutations. Now, we will look at some of the armed forces and see a few photos of them in action and or giving homage to Akhmat-Sila or Akhmat-Hadji that was not shown before:

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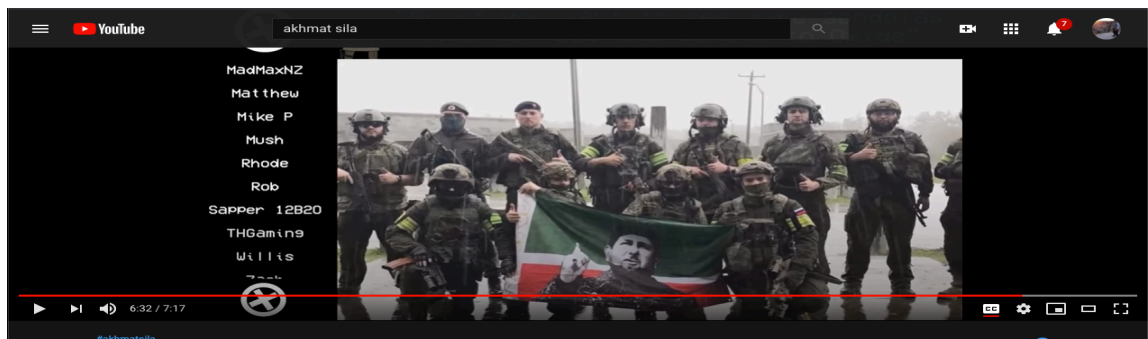
<sup>277</sup> Ibid, Instagram. This is also a translation done by me.

Figure 4.44

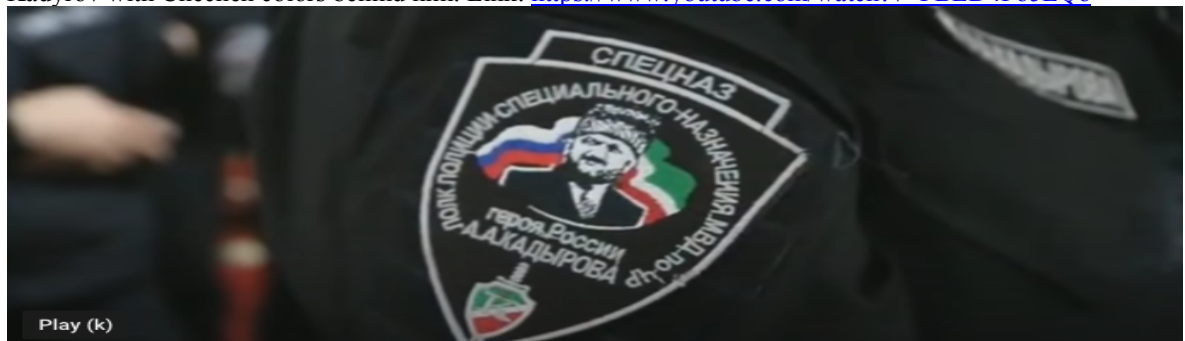


Above is a YouTube video showing a training montage for the Chechen SOBR Terek Group. The captions provide another description of Akhmat-Sila's significance to the local Chechen armed forces. Link:

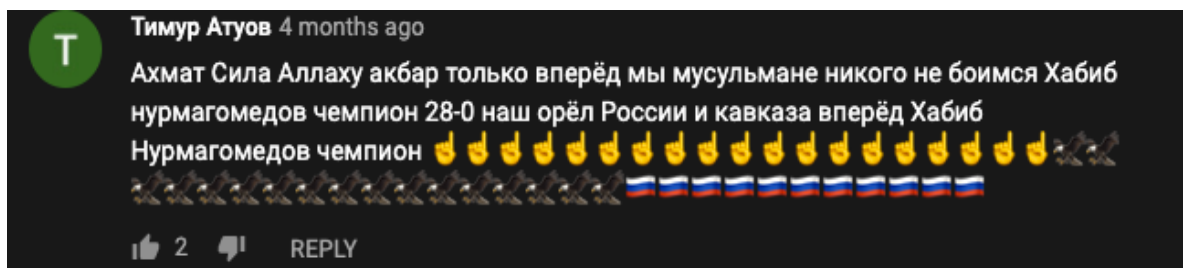
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBED4Fo5LQo>



From the same video a minute further we see a COBR Terek training group holding up the flag of Ramzan Kadyrov with Chechen colors behind him. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBED4Fo5LQo>



The patch worn by Kadyrovtsy. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBED4Fo5LQo>



Translation: “ Akhmat Sila Allahu-Akbar only forward we are not afraid of no one us Muslims, Khabib Nurmagomedov Champion 28-0 our eagle of Russia and Caucasus forward...[repeat].”

In this video in figure 4.44 and the following two screenshots you can see how the slogan is defined again along with the signs indexical of loyalty to Kadyrov and community of armed force groups. In addition to the mentioned factors, content creator Oxide goes into detail of SOBR Terek and its main differences with other SOBR units across the country, with the differences lying in the command, force size, gear, culture and specializations that the officers train in. One main difference is budget for gear. If not familiar with battle kit, much of the SOBR groups outside Chechnya are usually seen wearing the typical bulky Soviet-style gear while the special Terek unit is equipped with modern western-style sleek in appearance special operations gear. As for comments, a notable one was the last screenshot under figure 4.44.

This comment shows support for the Terek unit and connects the brotherhood through the Islamic religion, MMA warrior culture, and geographical sign linkage with the eagle, the natural imaginary of neighboring Dagestan. Below is another form of natural imagery:

Figure 4.45



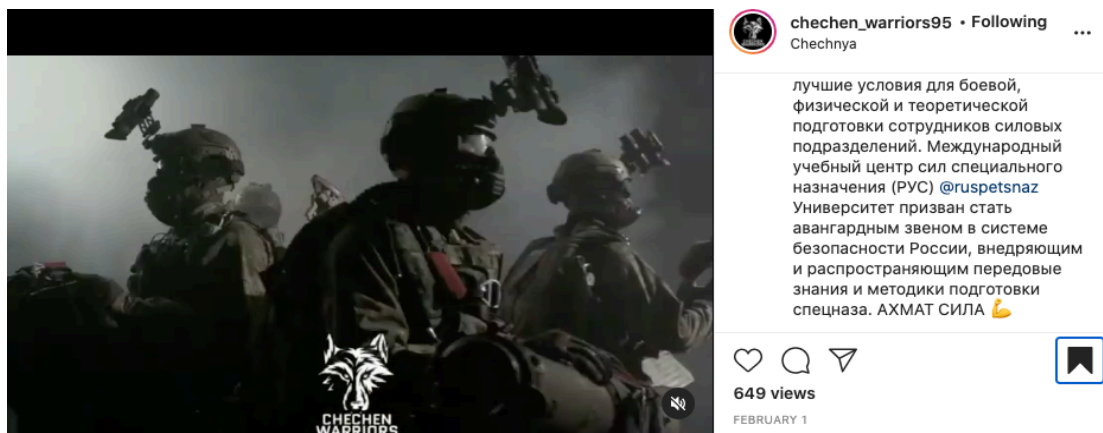
Source: [https://www.instagram.com/chechen\\_warriors95/](https://www.instagram.com/chechen_warriors95/)

Linking the imagined Chechen warrior to the wolf, the Chechen Warriors page helps as a promotional and directory platform for all happenings within the local Chechen armed forces community.<sup>278</sup> From video montages from the field, training events, to special preparation

<sup>278</sup> This page often has its own content of all the various armed forces in Chechnya and also re-circulates many of the shared posted that are seen in other Chechen government or affiliated. If you cannot find a specific unit's organizational page you have a high chance of finding a link to one in the postings here.

announcements, you can find a lot for support for Akhmat-Sila, often ending their postings and or video montages with the chant.<sup>279</sup> Many of the follower accounts at the bottom of the screenshots are by Chechen leadership and armed forces members who legitimize this page. The page also supplies a hyperlink to its Facebook page, which is quite surprising given that most of the circulating accounts other than Instagram are VK or Telegram.

Figure 4.46



February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKvpQ5jqgxA/>

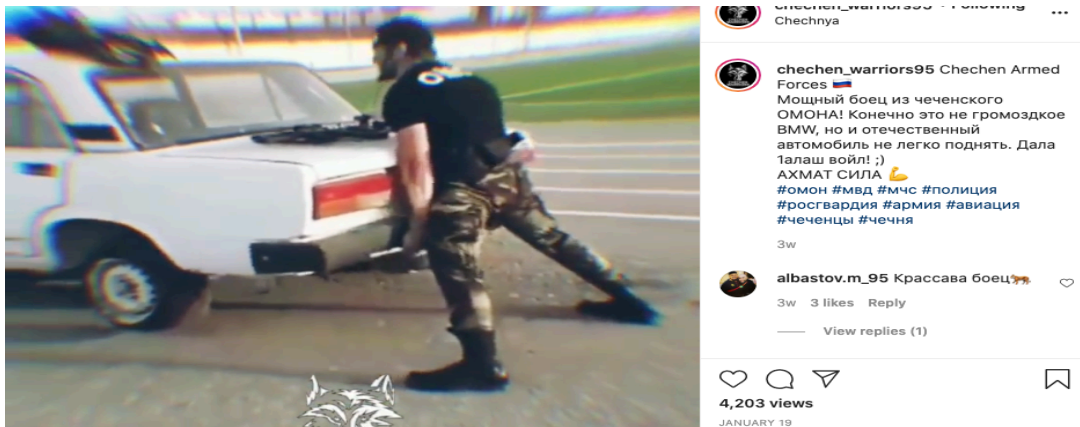
Figure 4.46 shows a typical post on the Chechen Warriors page, highlighting the specialness of their local forces and action as the forward operation force for national security.<sup>280</sup> Due to the constraints of the Instagram interface, it is impossible to display the whole comment and following hashtags. Luckily, I can list what is found at the bottom part of the post comment: #нохчо, #нохчи, #нохчалла, #чеченец, #чеченцы, #чечня, #грозный, #аргун, #г1алг1ай, #г1алг1и, #ингуш, #ингуши, #ингушетия, #магас, #назрань, #к1онах, #к1онхи, #вайнах,

<sup>279</sup> Chechen\_warriors95. "CHECHEN ARMED FORCES 🇷🇺 (@chechen\_warriors95) on Instagram • 698 Photos and Videos." Social Media. Instagram. Accessed March 31, 2021. [https://www.instagram.com/chechen\\_warriors95/](https://www.instagram.com/chechen_warriors95/).

<sup>280</sup> Translation of captured screenshot post: "...best conditions for combat, physical, and territorial preparations of staff/officers of the armed forces. International learning center force of the special name РУС @ruspetsnaz the university called to be the avant-garde link in the Russian security system, introducing and distributing advanced knowledge and methods of special forces preparation. Akhmat-Sila. (Strong arm emoji)."

#брат, #борз, #берзлой, #волк, #инстаграм, and #berzloy.<sup>281</sup> Some hashtags coincide with hashtags found in the arch screenshot with Chechen translations of the Russian (#нохчо, #нохчи, #нохчалла). In addition to this post, there are hashtags indexing to a greater Chechnya, including the Chechen ethnic sibling the Ingush (#ингуш, #ингуши, #ингушетия, #магас, #назрань). Together, Chechens and Ingush fall under the term Vainakh, also seen as brothers linked to the wolf imaginary(#вайнах, #брат, #борз). Akhmat-Sila in this post is not only indexical to Chechens, but also to their closest neighbors, the Ingush.

Figure 4.47



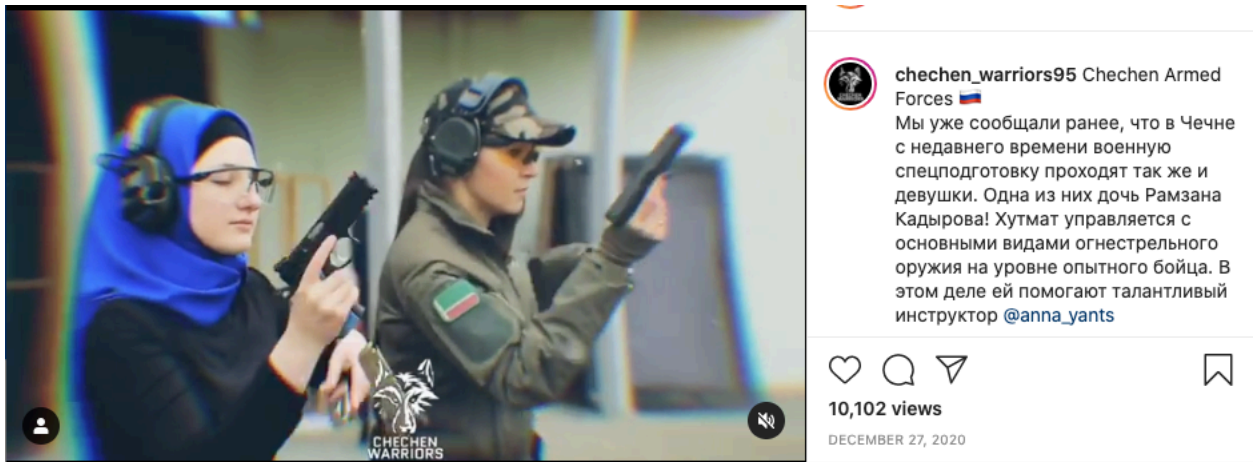
OMON lifting car.<sup>282</sup> January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKPGtl1qrGh/>

In figure 4.47, we have another physical representation of Akhmat-Sila lifting a vehicle, as Rustam(@rustamocher) demonstrated in the patronage section. This time an OMON member demonstrates what Akhmat-Sila means as a foot soldier of Ramzan Kadyrov. He succeeds in lifting the vehicle, showing that the followers of Akhmat-Sila include a physical strength component to the slogan's significance.

<sup>281</sup> The following terms, please copy and paste into Yandex Translate for meaning. Some of the terms are Chechen and cannot be found in the one Chechen dictionary I have. The words that could be translated would lose its significance if changed, but feel free to use the above method.

<sup>282</sup> Translation: "Powerful fighter from the Chechen OMON! Of course this is not a bulky BMW, but the domestic automobile is not easy to raise. (Chechen) Akhmat-Sila."

Figure 4.48



As women are not left out of MMA, they are not left out of learning special tactics with small and medium sized arms. However, here in this screenshot is Ramzan's youngest adult daughter training with @anna\_yants. December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJT20-eKbwK/>

One interesting find on the Chechen warriors page is Kadyrov's youngest adult daughter shooting at the range. In figure 4.48 she trains with the Kazakhstani Anna Yants, a Russian Spetznaz marksman instructor. Akhmat-Sila not only means Chechen men must be well-versed in weapons, but Chechen women can be too, if they stick to customs. A few of the customs seen here is that of only female company and Kadyrov's daughter's compliance with wearing the hijab. Aside from this main difference, she runs the shooting course with relative skill, with the page likening her to an experienced warrior.

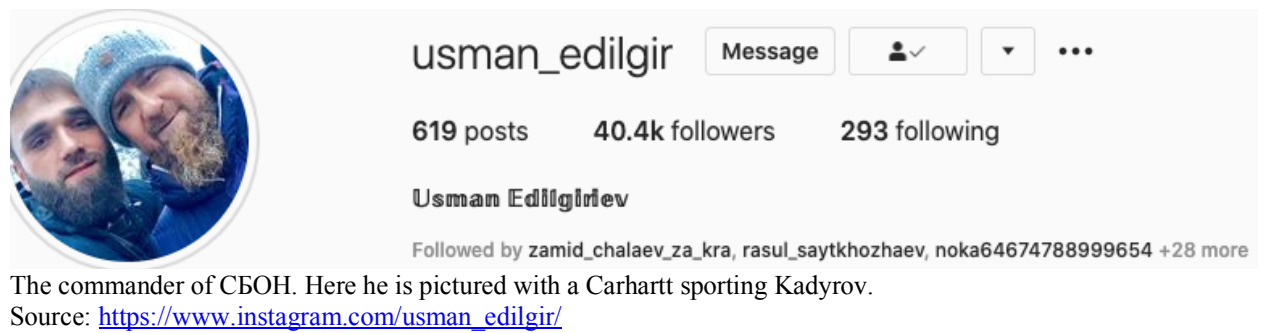
Figure 4.49



On the page after some digging around I realized I found another special forces battalion that I did not know about previously. This unit in the video link in the next screen shot seem to specialize in road operation in overwhelming numbers. Source: [https://www.instagram.com/batalyon\\_grozny/](https://www.instagram.com/batalyon_grozny/)



Figure 4.50



Above in figure 4.50, we can see Usman Edilgir. Unsure of any familial connections with Kadyrov, he is the head of the СБОН battalion depicted in figure 4.49. In his profile you can see various occurrences seen in many other similar profiles; pictures with Ramzan Kadyrov, wearing Akhmat-Sila apparel, birthday salutations, pictures with heads of other legitimate armed groups in the regions such as SOBR Vismuradov and Kadyrovtsy Chalaev, and congratulations to Kadyrov's family members and holidays.

Figure 4.51



From what we can see from the Chechen armed forces, we can notice all of them utilize the slogan as a signifier and a way to show support to the Kadyrov government and leadership as is apparent at the end of the comment in figure 4.51. Although there are many battalions,

<sup>283</sup> Translation: "Fighters from the Chechen special forces SBON Grozny Special-purpose battalion "Grozny" Raid events. The formidable battalion in the defense of the Chechen Republic is always in the ranks. Respect and thanks! To our Head of the Chechen Republic, Our national leader Ramzan Akhmatovich Kadyrov(Chechen) Akhmat-Sila Allahu-Akbar."

regiments, and special units, they all show comradery to each other and possibly socialize together on and off duty. Some groups tend to be more prominent and have deeper roots in Chechnya, while some groups such as CBOH, are relatively new and have a much smaller follower base on Instagram. They are all armed and the most specialized units seem to be the most heavily armed.



## Conclusions

After reviewing all pertinent data, I can say Chechen identity historically revolves around a traditional identity that evolves with time around warrior culture, Chechen adat, and religion to include certain aspects of the traditional meaning mutating to Kadyrov's formulation. In addition, Chechen warrior culture has consistently tied itself to a strongman-like figure that usually held a larger than life personality and great leadership skills. During the Chechen Wars and Chechenisation period, this cult of personality leadership switched hands quickly due to the volatility of such positions during these times. However, only one Chechen leader out of a handful to exist during this period was immortalized.

This immortalized man was Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov. All the other leaders such as Dudayev, Basayev, and Maskhadov can only be found in niche history books, no statues, and definitely not presented in a good light in today's Chechnya. The Mufti on the other hand, was sanctified as a martyr for not only Chechnya, but for the Russian Federation. Akhmad-Hadji's son Ramzan Kadyrov immortalized him not only by putting his face everywhere, but wrapped into a slogan, Akhmat-Sila. The main difference for Akhmat-Hadji's mythical elevation was that he sided with Putin's Government for autonomy and financial security in return for Russia's physical security in the region. Due to this connection, in 2004, Ramzan Kadyrov was able to take the helm of the insurgency operations with Putin's blessing; this set of factors brought in the new era for Chechen identity and memory formation. Ramzan Kadyrov's 14 years as head of the Chechen Republic has not only eradicated nearly all insurgents by killing them or absorbing them into his personal forces, but has brought upon complete change to Chechnya.

Some but not of these changes include: infrastructure redevelopment, social mobility for young people, security, religious revival (although in the Kadyrov sense), a fitness culture that

extends into international sport competitions for the gifted, clothing apparel, super signage of Kadyrov's father Akhmat-Hadji attached to every building entrance, but has developed a slogan that can wrap all these aspects of his rule into one, Akhmat-Sila.

Scholars of Ramzan Kadyrov's social media use have often focused on his personal use of Instagram before his December 2017 account closure due to US sanctions for human rights abuses related to the LGBT purges. All unfavorable aspects aside, Kadyrov sought to rebrand Chechnya in a new light: as the land that produced world class fighters in all domains, as the most pious region of Russia, and as the most developing and beautifying region to date. These scholars that study Kadyrov's Instagram consistently identified certain factors in all his postings to the social media platform revolving around heteronormative and cultural lines. However, within the quantitative and qualitative analyses of Kadyrov's original profile, there was a gap in the study of Kadyrov's proliferating slogan that required a more in-depth exploration of the Chechen social media sphere. This research not only attempts to explore all the various signs used in Chechen social media, but seeks to understand the all-encompassing slogan that is proliferating across the digital sphere, material culture, and warrior culture in Chechen society.

With a theoretical framework of nation-branding and a digital ethnographic methodology to aid the phenomenological analysis of the proliferation of Akhmat-Sila, I have sifted through as much information as possible for the scope of this thesis to come up with findings that could lead to a more expansive and comprehensive study on the subject in the near future by other scholars. After reviewing much of the visual and textual data found on Instagram and supporting sources, picking the sources best able to define the slogan Akhmat-Sila, its original significance grew much wider and prevalent in use, thus developing into Ramzan Kadyrov's contemporary branding of Chechnya reaching the international level. Not only is Akhmat-Sila indexed by other

textual signs that circulate in Chechnya, such as *Za Kra*, *pekhota kra*, and 95 within the leadership, fight club members, armed forces members and supporters, but to sainthood and memorialization of his late father, Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov.

Akhmat-Sila to many but not all Chechens signifies a historical period of turmoil that they have climbed out of to reach new heights that many could not have dreamed of before. Historically an egalitarian society that placed importance on freedom, Kadyrov's Akhmat-Sila signifies a new Chechnya where expedient social mobility is possible in a narrative that has been historically accepted, the hero in local warrior culture, the Chechen *Djigit*.<sup>284</sup> However, Kadyrov exchanges the traditional Chechen meaning of freedom of political independence expressed in Russian literature or the First Chechen War for a modern, realistic one that focuses on financial security, social mobility, safety, and regime loyalty. Kadyrov provides two avenues that fit this locally revered historical image while maintaining control over his patronaged: joining one of his fight clubs or helping manage events, and or enlisting in his security forces to support his regime. This patronage is not only provided for ethnic Chechens, but to anyone willing to push his branding onto the international platform; such as UFC and Boxing celebrities such as Tyson, Mayweather, Chechens out of the region such as Khamzat Chimaev, or fighters new to the sport or those looking for a sponsor to eventually enter the UFC, such as Georgian-born Liana Jojua.

This patronage that Kadyrov delves out is not only used for people, but for infrastructure. Akhmat-Sila began to appear on infrastructure, from combat-sport training centers, to special operation training centers, to airports, to the renovated entry arch to Grozny and most recently, a massive holographic image in Dubai on the Burj Khalifa, demonstrating its proliferation. Not only does this slogan act as a watermark on all new buildings with the slogan inscribed on it,

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<sup>284</sup> Hero in Chechen.

Akhmat-Sila signals to all who is the leader initiating the project, even though the funds come directly from Moscow. For the holographic image, it demonstrates that wealthy countries acknowledge the image of Akhmat-Hadji and the slogan. For foreigners and visitors to Grozny, the slogan will be their first inquiry upon exiting the airport and driving into town. To those who know what Akhmat-Sila means, will see it as the branding of an era. Others critical of the slogan will see it as an era of oppression.

In conclusion, Akhmat-Sila means a few things that are difficult to put into one sentence. The main significance of the slogan is that Akhmat-Sila is a constant reinforcement of Kadyrov's control of Chechnya in the digital and physical space. The slogan serves in a viral capacity, easily spread and hard to get rid of once it becomes an utterance in Chechen popular culture. Socially, the slogan serves as a social elevator. Any person who uses the slogan can be guaranteed protection in a dispute in Kadyrov's Chechnya and comfortable living in regime controlled organizations. To dissidents abroad, the slogan signifies that they are powerless to criticize as long as they have family in the region, even on social media. Politically, the slogan brings legitimacy to the regime, linking the slogan to famous fighters, fight clubs, heads of state, luxury items, and warp-speed infrastructure development. Religiously, the slogan is a moniker for the new religious identity, one that praises Akhmat a little more than Allah. Culturally, the slogan serves as a vehicle to the new Chechen identity that is a resemblance of the past, in mutated form to serve the regime in a larger but quieter Russian narrative.

## **Limitations**

In the scope of this research during the Covid-19 pandemic, we had affordances that have allowed us to explore what Akhmat-Sila means in different aspects of Kadyrov's Chechnya online, but there were also many limitations that limited certain areas of the research. Interviews

were not explored in this research, primarily because interviewing an inhabitant who is currently in Chechnya could be, one, potentially dangerous for the individual, or two, they will not delve into any information that is reserved for Chechen society. A culture of silence may always be an obstacle to someone who does not have an inside link to the region.

For now, any criticism of Kadyrov or Akhmat-Sila must be taken from those who wish to disclose it publicly online. An interview with someone outside the government establishment would enrich the conversation, but may need to come from a Chechen in the diaspora in the future. An offline in-person component was not included due to the hostilities and challenges academics and journalists face visiting to conduct research in the region. MMA training was an option before the December 2020 U.S. sanctions, which now is out of the question for Americans. In addition, an in-person component was never part of the scope. Data loss from U.S. sanctioned accounts also proved to be an obstacle, although thanks to Chechen Instagram culture, re-circulation of posts from the original accounts helped mitigate data lost on original Kadyrov and entourage accounts.

Due to the massive amounts of circulating data, it is nearly impossible to include everything and keep up with events that would enhance the research in a hyper-digitized world. Kadyrov and some of his entourage use Telegram, VK, and possibly Tik-Tok although this is not verified yet. These would be other social media platforms to explore and may be easier to navigate. These other social media platforms were not explored in this thesis and were not the focus, primarily to keep the work from extending into a Kissinger-sized manuscript. Another area that needs work is Chechen language translation of colloquialisms. They are prevalent in more traditional postings and would be an interesting aspect. However, without a reliable translation and books that do not always expand to these cultural references, needs a separate

study of its own. So say the least, this study of Akhmat-Sila will provide a basis to all who find a curiosity of contemporary Chechnya on and offline.

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